

Taking Business Online

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Back in 1996, Jackie Monticup set out to expand her business's customer base. The retail business, The Magic Trick Shop, in Charlottesville, Va., opened by Jackie and her husband Peter Monticup in 1994, sold, you guessed it, magic tricks, but after having been opened in the area for a few years, Monticup discovered that foot traffic to their store was beginning to disappear.

"When you first open in an area," say Monticup, "the first couple of years people flock to you, then the novelty wears off, and it's hard to get customers back." Her trick to hook more customers was to explore the then fledgling World Wide Web. "I thought it would be nice to be a world magic shop instead of a neighborhood magic shop."

Instead of hiring a Web consultant or developer, Monticup took to the task herself. "We didn't have a business that we could draw money from [to hire a Web professional]," she says. "Magic Tricks Inc. wasn't going to give us the financial backing we needed to hire a developer."

The Monticups went fully virtual in 2001 with Magictricks.com, closing its retail location and moving the company's Internet operations to its Gordonsville, Va., warehouse, mostly due to Jackie Monticup's dedication to going online.

Here, she walks you through her 12-step program to setting up an e-commerce site, with tools that are cheap, and even free, that will do it for you.

Make a plan of action. A lot of people don't bother to take this step, but putting your business online will broaden your field of competitors and your customers, and is a very different retail world than the brick-and-mortar setting you are used to. Understanding what you are selling, who else is selling it, and to whom is imperative to taking your business online.

Choose a domain name. When picking a name, Monticup suggests several things. First, stay with the .com domains. "There are still a lot of people getting used to Internet, and to them, only .com means a website," Monticup says. Second, don't use a hyphen or use numbers in your domain name. Hyphens and numbers are difficult to remember, and if the domain name is mistyped, your site will not be found. Also, don't try to get too clever when creating it. "If you have to explain how the name is spelled, it won't be effective," says Monticup. Your domain name needs to be a word or phrase that people can understand correctly when they hear it. She suggests using your exact company name or, if that's taken, make your domain name be what you do. For example, if you sell apples, try Deliciousapples.com. "If they don't find you under name, they'll look you up under what you sell," Monticup says. Lastly, keep it short.

Register your domain name. Domain names are registered on an annual basis through companies who have been granted a license to act as agents (registrars). The registration fee for a single year runs between about \$8.95 per year to \$35 per year, depending on the registrar. Though it is best to go with the low price, be careful to choose a registrar that also makes it easy for you to manage control of the domain name.

There are a lot of inexpensive registrars to choose from, but Monticup's favorite is GoDaddy.com because it is inexpensive (\$8.95 per year for a registration) and has an easy-to-use system. "You can go back into database and access accounts and easily change information on your domain, sell and transfer it out easily," she adds. You can also easily reach real support people by phone and e-mail.

Find a webhost (also known as an Internet Service Provider or ISP). There are thousands of these, and you can spend endless hours evaluating and comparing features and costs. But when you're just starting, even the most basic package you purchase will be sufficient. Monticup suggests using a hosting company in your local area first so that you can have face-to-face contact with someone in those crucial first months of establishing an e-commerce website. Another idea is to sign up for a hosting plan with the same company you used to register your domain name. "When you are first starting out, there's no reason to spend more than \$19.95 a month for a good hosting package, including one with e-commerce," she says. In fact, many good packages, such as the ones from GoDaddy.com, are in the \$7.95-8.95 per month range. Look for a plan that includes at least 100Mb of disk space, 2-3 GB of monthly transfer, at least one e-mail account, e-mail forwarding accounts, a database, 24x7 support, daily backups, and FrontPage extensions (if you will be using FrontPage to build your site) or 24x7 FTP access. Especially in the first months of establishing your site, you won't need the extra capacity of a more expensive plan.

Build the website. The tools you use to build a website are directly related to how patient you are and how much you want to learn. A small-business owner can use an existing e-commerce service like Yahoo! Merchant Solutions, or your ISP might have a storefront feature that you can use.

Monticup preferred building the Magictricks.com site on her own using Microsoft Frontpage. "Because it is such a popular program, it has incredible online support through forums, newsgroups, and websites, a discussion of FrontPage tips and techniques, as well as extensive offline support in the form of the dozens of books containing FrontPage tips and tricks that are available," Monticup says.

"It's not difficult, but it's not point and click, either," she says. "You can always start out with a point and click store from another source, and then later go back and use FrontPage to rebuild your store once you've become more comfortable with the e-commerce process," she adds.

The easiest, quickest way to build a website is to use a point and click storefront, one that requires you to fill in some information to automatically create a storefront. The tradeoff is that you are very limited in how you can design your site -- your store will look very much like everyone else's. The next choice is to use a storefront builder program, offered by a number of ISPs as a part of their hosting packages (or available at an additional cost). These programs are specifically designed for the new website owner and require a "fill in the blanks" approach that automatically creates a site as well. Additionally, as you become familiar with the program, you can add your own personalized design touches.

Or you can choose to use a software program like FrontPage. Like any software program, FrontPage requires an investment in time to learn how to use the program, though a basic website can be built in a few hours. The big advantage to FrontPage is that it has a built in publishing function; you do not need to learn anything about the process of transferring files to your hosting company to put your site "live" on the Internet. Also, there is a tremendous amount of flexibility with FrontPage; it is easy to build a site that is completely different from any other site. And, you can choose to learn to write code for your site yourself. Though this sounds difficult, there are simple tutorials offered by sites such as HTMLgoodies.com and PageResource.com that are worth reviewing, as most programs like FrontPage also allow you to tweak your pages by altering the raw code. The tutorials will also help you see that coding looks a lot more complex than it really is, and make the process of building a website much less intimidating.

When building your first site, keep it simple. "What users want is to see a very clean design and an easy way to order from you," Monticup says. "You can add the fancy stuff after you've established that your site can sell." Flash introductions, special graphics effects, Javascript, and interactive components may be cool, but they may also make your site hard to use. "Keep your focus on what you are trying to accomplish -- building a site that makes customers want to buy what you have to sell. Period."

Once the site is built, you need to transfer your files to your hosting company's server. You can either transfer using FTP (File Transfer Protocol) or using the built-in publishing function of FrontPage. FTP is accomplished using an FTP program, available for a download at sites like Tucows.com or are sometimes offered by a hosting company. FTP programs like CuteFTP and CoffeeCup Direct FTP are easy to use, and cost around \$40 to own (which is inexpensive in the long run, as you will be using the program frequently, each time you want to change something on your site).

Build a product database. If you are selling more than one product, you will need to find a way to list your products on your site, a way that will also allow you to easily make changes to your prices and descriptions. The more products you offer, the more critical this product management function becomes. If you are using a point-and-click program, the database is built into the system for you. Some shopping carts offered by some ISPs may also offer a built-in database function. If you are building your own storefront, and you have a lot of different products to sell, you should build your product pages using a database.

Monticup recommends an easy to use but powerful program like Stone Edge Technologies' EComm Assembler. This program allows even the novice webmaster to simply fill in pertinent information about each product to have product pages automatically generated. Information and pricing changes are then easily made through a master control panel, making store maintenance easy.

Establish payment capabilities. An estimated 95% of your business online will be through credit-card purchases, so you'll need to establish a merchant account. If you have an existing merchant account, you'll only need to tell the provider that you are now accepting Internet orders, which will affect your merchant account fee, but will allow you to process payments without physically "swiping" cards through a machine. If you don't have an established merchant account, Monticup suggests using an online service like PayPal.com.

Customers can use any credit card to pay you through PayPal, PayPal has fraud protection policies for both customers and merchants, and you don't have to go through the approval process and expense of setting up a merchant account with a credit-card processing company. "You're paying a tiny percent more per sale to PayPal, but you can get up and running in five minutes," Monticup says.

Add a shopping cart. If you have a merchant account and will be processing your own credit-card charges, or even if you have signed up to accept PayPal payments, you will need a program to allow customers to send orders to you. "We use a program through Americart.com, which lets you easily put shopping cart functionality on any product page," Monticup says. Americart.com supplies a snippet of code to put on each product page (any website building program allows you to go in and add raw code, and the "how to" can be found at PageResource.com). The "Add to Cart" button that then appears on the product page has your store code built into it, so when the "add to cart" button is clicked on your store's product page, a securely encrypted order is sent through the Americart system and then out to you for fulfillment.

If you are accepting PayPal payments only, PayPal also offers a similar program. Other options are using a point-and-click all-in-one system like Yahoo! Merchant Solutions, using a shopping cart included with your hosting plan, or purchasing a standalone shopping cart program. The last two options require extensive knowledge of programming (or hiring a programmer) and are not for the beginner.

Promote your online store. In order for customers to find your store, you must be listed in online search engines and directories. To speed the inclusion of your site in the listings of the major search engines, you can submit your site to each and request that your site be spidered, or visited, by the engines (and hopefully then included and listed). A quick and easy way to do this is to use a submission program. The one that Monticup recommends is Selfpromotion.com. because it is inexpensive (\$20 per year), is simple to use, and is comprehensive. You simply put in the domain name that you want to promote and click off the appropriate search engines and directories. It sends a personalized submission to

engines and keeps track of what you've done. It has all of the major search engines included as well as regional and smaller directories.

If you're just starting out, it might take a couple of months for search engines to find you. Using pay-for-click programs will get your site listed faster. According to Monticup, it's the only way to get noticed right away. Overture.com, Sprinks.com, and Google.com are the major pay-per-click programs. Each allows you to deposit money into an account, and then select search terms that you think customers will use when searching for your type of product. You set a bid price for each search term (you are bidding against your competitors to be ranked higher on the search results page) and you pay your bid price out of your account each time a potential customer clicks on your listing. Strategy is useful in maximizing pay-per-click participation. "Though it is important to be in the top 10, it is not so important to be Number One. Many customers will click on the top 10 or so listings, just to compare. The number one listing is getting similar traffic to the number 10 listing, but paying a lot more per click for it." Monticup adds.

Maintain your site. It is extremely important to regularly check for broken links. Broken links look unprofessional and do not give the customer confidence that you are a reliable company to deal with. Netmechanic.com is a free service that will help you check for broken links. You also want to frequently review where people are coming from and which pages they are viewing. Sitetracker.com will do this for free or for \$8.95 per month, you can purchase the professional level, which includes much more detail, such as how people are traveling through your site, how long they are spending on your site, etc., and stores your historical data for you.

Constantly improve your site. Add e-mail forms to better communicate with your customers. Send out an e-mail newsletter to promote your site. Bravenet.com offers a number of free tools for websites, including forums, classified ads program, password gates, and links directories.

Don't stop learning. If you've made the commitment to do it yourself, you need to stay up to date. Monticup suggests that one of the best places for businesspeople on the Web is the LED Digest -- a free discussion list moderated by Adam Audette, focused on Internet marketing, search engine optimization and placement, and small business issues. The list is published daily, Monday through Friday, and is sent directly to your email box.

"It's incredible the amount of knowledge you can get from the other business people who contribute to this forum, and many times you can contact these people directly for more information," says Monticup. You can search the list archives at list.audette-media.com/archives/led.html and also sign up for the daily email newsletter there.

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