

7 Secrets to Online Business Success

by Steve Chittenden

I've done more here than just cover 7 principles of online success. Yes, I do lay out these important secrets, but I also illustrate them with examples so you can see how they have proven themselves to work in real life situations. This material is copyrighted, but can be shared freely as long as it is provided complete, unaltered, and without charge. I hope you find it useful, valuable, and worth passing on.

Whether you have a "traditional" (brick and mortar) business that you are bringing online, or an online only business, the secrets for success are essentially the same. The reason I call these secrets is not because they're hard to find, but because so few have discovered them. Most web sites fail, so looking at the ones that succeed yields beneficial insight, and I've put together this outline of proven success principles.

Online Business Success Secret #1:

Be different.

In marketing, we call it "differentiation" and it is critical to your success. This is true of both online and offline marketing. You must answer the question, "Why should the customer or client choose you or your product?" Trying to mimic your competition too closely is pointless. No matter how good they are, there is something you can do differently and better.

To discover how you will differentiate yourself, a combination of research and brainstorming can be very effective. It will probably require the services of a marketing expert, but the rewards far exceed the investment. Another great source of information is asking your customers what they like most about your product or service. They may even provide valuable ideas on how you can improve.

Let me demonstrate by looking at a successful alternative to eBay. It is very obvious that eBay dominates the online auction market, so this makes a great example of differentiation. Etsy.com puts together buyers and sellers of handmade items, and only handmade items. Although this does not mean that a sewing machine or power tools can't be used, it does mean that the items are not mass produced, and that distinction sets them apart.

Online Business Success Secret #2:

Don't worry about competition.

One of the misguided desires many people have is to want as little competition as possible. In a bad economy, you may get your wish, but less competition is not always good. If there is enough market to support your product or service, there will be competition. Limited competition could easily indicate limited opportunity.

No matter how many competitors there are, there is almost always room for more. Wherever you see a McDonald's, you will usually see a Burger King not far away. Here's an even better example: think about how often you see both Walgreen's and Rite Aid on the same corner, right across from each other.

Since we're talking about the online business world here, let me demonstrate with an especially interesting example. Back when there were a zillion free clip art sites, along comes ArtToday.com and has the gall to start charging a fee. They justified the cost by having a huge library with a fast search engine so you could quickly find clip art based on your search criteria. They provided an easy to use service that put the free clip art sites to shame.

Here's where it gets even more interesting. They were able to acquire several defunct clip art sites and add even more images to their ever growing library. Eventually, they even ended up buying one with the perfect domain name, and that is the web address you will now find them under. It's now called

clipart.com which used to be one of their competitors.

Online Business Success Secret #3:

Build a high quality web site.

I am not trying to just state the blatantly obvious here, but cover some basic principles to define what a high quality site is, and clear up some common misconceptions about what makes a good web site. To many site owners, if it looks professional and everything works, then it's good. There is more to it than that.

To begin with, your web site visitor will spend an average of 8 seconds making a decision about staying or leaving, so they must be able to get a general idea of what your page or site is about within that time. Content must be organized in a logical manner. Clean and simple design is best because too much just confuses the eyes. Confused visitors quickly leave.

Every page must have a specific purpose or goal, a desired action for the visitor to take, and it must be easy for them to take that action. This requires planning. The "flow" of your page needs to support the desired outcome. You must even inform the visitor what action to take so they don't have to figure it out on their own.

Beyond these basic principles, the rest of the definition for a high quality web site depends on your situation. If your site is ecommerce, then a secure, easy checkout system is a must. If you have a lot of products or content, then a Search feature is expected. The key is to have all the needed functions while being easy to use.

The best way to illustrate these principles is to use Google because their simplicity is perfect. Now I realize your web site will probably need a bit more something to serve your business goals, but you should start with the minimal elements and add only what is really needed.

Think about how many people would scoff at the Google design. Now think back to the days when we had a dozen or so major search engines all trying to dominate the market. Then along comes this thing called Google that we never heard of, and rises above all the more established search engines to become #1.

Online Business Success Secret #4:

Great content is a must.

This principle is very close to building a high quality web site, but deals specifically with your most critical component. The expression, "Content is king," really is true. The content is more than just the words on the page, but the words are usually the primary content.

This does not mean that every situation requires you or someone you hire to create all the content. Think about sites like YouTube or Facebook. The users are adding most of the content, but even if people are there to connect with other people, at the heart of it they are still there for the content.

The majority of online business models do require great content writing, yet as a whole, it is among the

most under valued aspects of web site design. Many web site owners either do their own writing, or hire someone who is inexpensive enough to meet their budget. This may not be the only success killer, but it is a significant one.

As an example of Internet marketing genius, [Kraft Foods](#) went beyond just publishing recipes like so many others do. They developed a series called One Bag, Five Dinners which laid out an entire menu plan with recipes, and complete with a shopping list to make it even easier and time saving. It also saves customers money because the ingredients purchased would be used for more than one recipe.

Online Business Success Secret #5:

Keep your web site updated.

I tend to agree with the analogy that your web site should be treated like your most valued employee. Just like a neglected employee would not perform very well, neither will a neglected web site.

I've heard it said that a visitor usually comes back to a web site 7 times before they make a purchase. I am not sure of the source of this information, but since I have repeatedly observed it to be true in principle, the exact number does not matter. The fact is, you need your visitors to come back, and for that, they must have a compelling reason.

So unless you're Alex Tew of [milliondollarhomepage.com](#), you need to keep your web site updated to be successful.

Online Business Success Secret #6:

Use networking to build trust.

The concept of networking certainly predates the Internet, but I don't believe most web site owners are properly using the power of online networking. Hopefully, you are already using strategic alliances where you form relationships with related businesses to give and receive referrals. Maybe you are also a member of LinkedIn, Twitter, and other networking sites.

Just like networking out in the physical business world, online networking works best if you resist the urge to "sell" anything. You are making connections and building relationships. You are sharing your knowledge. You are discovering how other people think and what is important to them.

But unlike the physical world where they may or may not be able to find your business card when they need it, online networking leaves a data trail that is easy to follow. Not only can people you interact with find you, the data trail is searchable; and someone you never interacted with can get to know and trust you before they make the decision to contact you.

In October, 2008, the New York Times ran a story about a Dutch consultant whose frustration with the battery life for his iPhone turned into an unexpected business. He simply asked the question on LinkedIn if anyone knew of a way to extend the battery life. He bought a recommended product and was very pleased with it.

After posting again on LinkedIn that he had found a solution to his problem, others in his network were

asking to order one. He went from satisfied customer to distributor and had 1200 orders the first day. You can see the product and his web site at 3gjuice.com.

Online Business Success Secret #7:

Be search engine friendly.

Perhaps your first thought here is, "Hey, that's no secret. Everyone knows a web site should be search engine friendly." I'm not going to talk about search engine optimization (SEO) the way most others seem to be doing. I think I have some surprises for you.

This principle is deliberately last because of the priority it has in your marketing mix. SEO is not unimportant, it is very important, and should be planned from the earliest stages of any web site design. But it's not important in the same way many people want you to believe. All of the above "secrets" should be considered equal, and SEO is a close second.

Here is the problem with SEO and the way it generally gets used. Every web site owner wants to be #1 in the search results. Let's suppose you get that coveted spot and a visitor lands on your site. Unless you've applied all the rules above, and unless you are getting them at the right search phase, you could easily lose them.

Now that I have brought up search phase, let's briefly cover it. The more generic the search term, the earlier the search phase, meaning the person is researching, e.g. *digital cameras*. As a person gets more informed, the search terms get more specific, e.g. *Canon digital cameras*. When they are at the buying stage, it is the most specific, e.g. *Canon EOS 40D digital camera*.

The other drawback to search engine traffic is they arrive "cold" which puts you at an immediate disadvantage. What if you could warm them up first? Now think networking as outlined above. You need the help of something called "authority sites" which could include things like independent reviews, news articles or press releases, and being featured on information sites related to your business.

The anguilla-beaches.com web site provides one final example that illustrates all of these principles very well. When this site launched, the author was only 14 years old. She created this as an informational site because she loved the Caribbean island of Anguilla. Due to some effective Internet marketing, her site quickly out ranked many others, even the official tourism sites.

About the Author:

Steve Chittenden seeks to help business owners and organizations market themselves effectively and succeed. His company, Creative Business Services, provides carefully planned [web design, graphic design, writing, and marketing services](#) aimed at achieving this goal. Please visit www.cbscreative.com for more information.