

Going online? Review your business procedures

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Why going online means reviewing your business procedures

When taking your business online it's important to plan regular reviews to keep your finger on the pulse. You would hate to have a money-making opportunity pass you by because you failed to see demand for your products or service. Similarly, it is pointless to lose money because of some unnecessary inefficiency.

It is important to make sure all aspects of your business are working together and you do not pay more attention to any one area than is warranted.

It may be tempting to spend a lot of time on your online section as it is new and interesting. However, your traditional business will require as much attention as before to maintain its efficiency.

This is why it is important to assign job responsibilities to different key staff. If your Web site proves successful you will find this affects your business as a whole and you will need to reassess your internal processes.

You will find you have to adapt certain business areas to handle the changes which could affect the work performed by some of your staff. On top of this, your technology can be used to improve your business' internal communication systems.

As any successful business person knows, you have to periodically assess different aspects of your business in order to find out how well you are doing. You need to determine what is making money for you, where you are making losses and identify improvements and/or changes.

In order to keep your business operating effectively you should periodically review:

- Your products or services
- Your finances – in particular your forecasts
- Your systems
- Your Web site
- Contingency plans
- Staff

How to review your products or services

Through your online business you may experience a greater demand for certain items. You will have to ensure you can provide these. This means assessing, and if necessary, adjusting your staffing, supply and processing systems to make sure the requisites are available or easily obtained.

Likewise, you may find that your site feedback indicates a demand for a product or service that you don't presently provide, but could in the future. You will need to do a financial feasibility study to see if it is worthwhile introducing this item.

A product or service review also calls for a general assessment of what else is being offered by your competitors.

If you have just started competing on an interstate or global scale, you will have to widen your scanning of your economic environment to assess what is being offered elsewhere in the various markets.

Reviewing your finances

Changes to your business operations can affect your finances, especially in the short term.

Ensure you review financial position and cash flow forecasts before embarking on any major changes.

Review and update your **“Business Plan”** and **“Marketing Plan”**.

After updating your plans, we recommend you seek expert financial advice before proceeding too far.

Reviewing your business systems

Changes to your business operations can affect your existing management systems.

These systems can include:

- Your technological systems; and
- The physical processes.

Most businesses already use a range of technology in their day-to-day communications. These include telephone, voice mail, fax and in some cases, video conferencing. Most businesses also use computers to manage their office functions such as bookkeeping, invoicing, order processing, secretarial functions and so on.

The Internet adds an extra dimension to communication facilities with access to e-mail, search engines, bulletin boards and now increasingly Facebook and Twitter. These facilities can be used to improve both internal and external communications.

For example, e-mail can be used to:

Provide quick and comprehensive written communication with all staff, business associates or customers

Forward attachments, order supplies or negotiate business agreements

Transmit orders without having to take time differences into account.

However, having these communication facilities does not necessarily mean that they are being used effectively. Many people are apprehensive about modern technology, whilst others are still technologically illiterate.

In order to get the best use of these facilities you will need to make sure all the people in your own business are comfortable and able to adequately use your systems.

In addition, the Internet provides instant access to all the different sites out there on the Web. Searching on the Internet can be a valuable resource, particularly when doing market research.

However, it is often time consuming, distracting and a lot of time can be wasted by your staff surfing the Web.

The best way to make sure your staff are not abusing this facility is to come to an agreement about when they are allowed free access to the Internet. Perhaps this could be during their lunch hour or break periods.

Physical processes include all the non-electronic processes required to get your products or services to your customers. This includes physically handling goods, storage of stock, staff and vehicle movements and so on.

Such processes can be affected by any alteration to your business, as increased demands in certain areas can place a strain on the smooth running of your systems. Accordingly, these must be periodically assessed to make sure that they are working effectively and adjustments made where necessary.

Assessing your Web site's effectiveness

Your Web site is like any other aspect of your business and you will have to continually assess its effectiveness. This will call for:

Updating your content. This should be changed regularly to reflect changes to your product, special offers and so on. However, you may also wish to make major changes to your content after you have been operating for a while. This will help keep your site fresh and attractive to your customers.

Checking search engine listings. As the search engines continually change their page ranking formulas, it is a good idea to regularly assess your site's position on each major search engine and see if you can work out how to improve your position.

Checking for dead links. Check the links on your site on a regular basis to see if they are working correctly. Additionally, it is a good idea to include a feedback section to your site for problems such as this.

Monitoring site traffic. Regularly analyze your traffic statistics to see if they reveal any changes or trends in the way your site is being used. If there are any alterations in visitor behaviour, you should adjust your site accordingly.

Additionally, you may plan for a major design change. You should consider changing the overall look or design of your site to keep it fresh, reflect business changes or to make it more effective.

You may want to try adding or removing sections or features. Before removing pages assess the traffic statistics, as these pages may be used to gain access to your site. Put a redirect page to provide a link to your home page.

While undertaking periodic site reviews, list any possible future changes. If this is done over a period of time, you will be able to get an idea of what changes would be most effective, before you go to the expense of trying them out.

Contingency plans to deal with disruptions

If your business relies heavily on electronic equipment to handle your day-to-day functions and operations, you must ensure you plan for "down-time". Down-time is any period where your equipment cannot work because of equipment or power failure of some kind.

Any down-time can be disruptive, but if this goes on for an extended period it can have serious financial repercussions, as well as impact on business and customer relationships.

In order to minimize the impact of serious down-time, draw up plans for particular circumstances:

- Determine who to call for technical help.
- Have a list of the different experts you can call to sort out particular technological problems. Have this on paper, as you may not be able to access information on your computer!
- Consider installing a back-up power supply.
- Make sure you have adequate insurance cover. Some major problems can take days to fix and not many business can afford to withstand the attendant losses.

Minimizing the impact of “downtime”

You should consider what you can introduce to minimize the effect of down-time and to protect your business operations.

Back-up data. Set up a back-up program and stick to it. Your computer can be programmed to perform this function automatically. In the case of a total power failure or system crash, you will only lose the information entered after the last back-up.

Additionally, you may want to save two versions of your information, one to be worked on and one in case of problems. At the very least, save a current copy of your files and databases on Zip disks, or CDs and store them at a separate location. Alternatively, consider a ‘Cloud’ storage solution.

Second hard drive. It is relatively inexpensive to install a second hard drive in your system. This serves to back-up your original hard drive should it fail in any way. The second hard drive should automatically mirror the first so any information is simultaneously recorded on both systems. Additionally, all back-up functions will be duplicated. Should one hard drive fail for some technical reason, the other is there to take over your business operations.

Keeping staff on your side

Change always brings a level of uncertainty to your staff. The best method of countering this is to keep your staff as fully informed about the proposed changes as possible. This applies equally to technological changes.

When staff start working with unfamiliar computer systems and processes, you will experience a level of resistance from those who are not comfortable with modern technology. It will be important to make sure these staff members undergo the necessary training so they can work competently and efficiently.

It might prove cost-effective to select key people to undergo specialized training and for them to teach your other staff. Be careful to choose people who will be able to clearly explain the processes to the rest of your staff. Some people are more adept at this than others.

You may find that some of your staff will be very keen to embrace these particular changes. They could have more technological experience than you realize. You should keep these staff members in mind when selecting key people for training programs and planning future technological changes.

Going online could also affect the type of work your staff performs. You may find that some sections of your business expand and others lessen. This can affect the duties of different staff

members. You will need to ensure the right person is actually performing the work and their job description accurately reflects this.

You may also have to employ additional staff. If you require professional or specially trained staff, it is important a competent person interviews each applicant. You need someone who knows exactly what to ask to reveal whether the applicant has the experience you require.

Remember, you must also expect to pay for what you get. If you want a top quality Web developer, for example, you will need to pay appropriately.

Occupational health and safety concerns

Other aspects affecting your staff relate to occupational health and safety concerns. This is particularly relevant if your Web site results in a greater use of computers in your business.

In order to reduce physical or injury problems you will need to make sure that your seating facilities and work station arrangements comply with ergonomic guidelines. Not only will this reduce loss of productivity due to strain or injury, but is necessary to ensure you are not subject to Workers Compensation claims at a later date.

At the very least you should:

- Position the keyboard at elbow height so that wrists remain straight and elbows are held at a 90 degree angle.
- Position the monitor so that the top of the screen is at or slightly below eye level.
- Position the chair so that the person's feet rest flat on the floor, knees are at a 90 degree angle, back rests against the chair back and hips at a slightly obtuse (greater than 90 degree) angle.
- To reduce eye fatigue, set the monitor's contrast to high and brightness low, keep the screen free from dust and smudges.
- Make sure light does not reflect off the screen or use an anti-glare screen.

You should also look into the pertinent Work Cover regulations. This legislation is different for each state or territory.

Still need help?

If you need help with any of these matters please feel free to contact us.

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