

# Online success, the top ten principles

Whatever you do online there are ten key principles that will influence your success.

Although I'll write this from the point of view of a small or medium sized business because that's typically the sort of organisation I help out, these same principles apply to all sorts of other online ventures, such as youth organisations or charities who want new members or supporters, musicians, churches, or even just people who want their talents to be noticed and fortune to shine upon them.

I also write with the assumption that you have a website. You don't need one, but it makes writing easier if I assume you have. But you'll realise if you read all this, you can do this without any website at all. And pretty much all for free, too.

So take pen and paper and work out what you can do about each of these points, make a to do list, and work through it. This isn't theory, it's practical. So let's get on with it. Here are my top ten principles of online success (in no particular order):

## Be findable

Nothing's going to happen until someone visits your site. So you have to work out how to generate traffic.

There are four ways to get people to your site:

1. Through natural search. Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) aims to do this, to optimise your online properties to maximise the traffic you get from people using search engines.
2. Online advertising, most often Pay Per Click, the biggest provider being Google Adwords. You can place an online ad for free, and pay only when someone clicks on it and is taken to whatever page you direct them to. The price you pay is set by demand. This is good for generating test traffic but right now I'm not using this to generate profitable ongoing traffic.
3. Web 2.0 methods. It's another buzzword, but Web 2.0 refers to the latest wave of websites that are turning the web into an interactive place that ordinary, non-geeky people can put to work. YouTube for uploading videos. Flickr for photographs. Facebook and mySpace for social networking. Wikipedia. Del.icio.us for social bookmarking. Blogging and blog comments. Article publishing sites like Squidoo and HubPages. All these sites offer ways for us to generate traffic, build trust and develop our business.
4. Traditional methods. We shouldn't forget the whole world of traditional marketing where we can put our web address on stationery, signage, emails, and shop windows. Traditional press relations is still very effective too.

Basically, if someone's looking for what you provide, you have to be findable to them. See also keyword analysis later on.

## Work continuously on conversion

Almost everyone uses Google Analytics now to watch the traffic on their site. It's a free tool that provides the means to analyse the traffic you're getting to your site, where that traffic comes from, what they do when they get to your site, and how traffic moves towards your money pages (where you get them to buy something).

You get a comprehensive set of graphs, you can compare time periods, see where people come from geographically, what their computing environment is like, what keywords they used to find you, and so on.

All you have to do to get Analytics working is sign up for a free account, and then install the code they give you onto every page of your website.

Conversion refers to the rate at which visitors turn into paying customers. If you get 100 visitors per day, and sell one item a day, your conversion rate is 1%. If you can double your conversion rate, you'll double your sales to two a day, which is pretty cool.

There's an endless string of things you can do to try to improve conversion, and there are no rules, it all comes down to this: **the only truth is the sale**. So forget graphic design rules, forget grammar, forget what you read or what you're told. Test it. Basically, if a big red button works, a big red button it is.

You can set up your site so that some people see the big red button, the alternative photograph, the different headline, and others see the normal site. Run that for a while, check in Analytics which converts better, wait until you have statistical significance, and when you have, ditch the idea that works the worst, and set up another test based on the winner.

Marketing is always testing. Repeat after me: "marketing is always testing".

And you only test one thing at once. So do the button, then do the photograph, then do the headline, then try again.

If you're not doing this, you're throwing visitors away.

## Adhere to web standards

Back in the wild west days when the web was new, browsers (that's the software you use when you go onto the Internet eg. Internet Explorer, Firefox, Safari (on mac), or whatever AOL or Tiscali or whoever gives you) came up with their own ideas for the web as a way to gain competitive advantage.

That was leading to a divergence in the web, where websites were built for Internet Explorer, and then built again for Netscape.

That was stopped by the setting up of a standards body for the Web called the World Wide Web Consortium ([www.w3.org](http://www.w3.org)). Nowadays we build standards-compliant websites, and if

browsers don't display our websites properly, we consider the browser to be at fault.

This is becoming much more important because the range of devices people are using to access the web is becoming more diverse. Time was we all used Windows XP on a tv-type computer monitor and there were three common sizes of screen. Nowadays many people have widescreen monitors, even on laptops. And many more people are using mobile devices from tablet computers to personal digital assistants (PDAs) to mobile phones, and they have really small screens.

A website must be standards-compliant in order to have a hope of displaying reasonably well on all those devices.

You can check your own website. On the W3C site [www.w3.org](http://www.w3.org) in the left hand menu, go to the HTML Validator, copy the address of a page of your site and see if it validates. To my mind, a page that doesn't validate isn't really a web page.

Seriously invalid websites can fail to be picked up by the search engines.

## Have a sales process

Whichever sales process you use, you should use one. So your website needs to be built to support that.

For instance, Neil Rackham's strategy for making major sales has a stage where the customer has had, for instance, their car, for a while now. It no longer feels new, but they haven't thought of replacing it yet. So one strategy for that stage is to highlight how technology, product design and actually the world has moved on (parking sensors, collision anticipation systems, new visual styles, environmental issues) in order to develop dissatisfaction.

When the older car comes in for a service, a newer car may be given for the day for the customer to use. Online you might support that with a blog that highlights new features in the latest cars, or provide some loving photographs of new features on the home page.

Another strategy I read was all about sales efficiency. So don't send a sales person out to see anyone unless you've verified they've got budget, got a project and are ready to roll. So you might build a system where people enquire online and are taken through a number of stages where that sort of thing is verified before they get to speak with sales.

Basically this principle is: apply your sales process online. And if you don't have a sales process, I can help you develop one that's suitable for online sales.

## Check your site is usable

When I first heard the word 'usability' it sounded like one of those academic made-up buzzwords that mean nothing. But it means what it says: can people use your website?

I can't stress how important this is. Maybe I can try: **EVERY SITE SHOULD BE**

## **USABILITY TESTED.**

Basically, web development is done by clever (and beautiful) people for clients who know their business better than anyone. Between them, lots of assumptions get made about what the website users want and will think and do when working with the site.

And almost all those assumptions are completely wrong.

So they publish the site and the first person who comes to the site is at work, had a sleepless night worrying about the dog, has five minutes to book a flight or whatever, hasn't prepared, doesn't quite know how to spell the airport they want to fly to, is trying not to let the boss see what they're doing, and bingo. The clash of two worlds. Design versus reality.

So how can you get inside the head of the typical user?

Run a usability test.

I have a team of ordinary users who review websites for me. But it's not just the website we review.

I start from step one. For instance, in reviewing a log cabin website, I might start with:

"Can you think of a scenario where you might want to buy a log cabin? What is that scenario?"

I investigate their beliefs and fears about log cabins.

Then I start to look at how they might go about finding out more. I ask for how they search online, what phrases they use on what sites.

I ask for their opinion on competing sites against our own.

And then I ask them to complete a task on our site, for instance, to enquire, or to buy something. I want to know what they think, how they feel, about problems and good stuff.

It doesn't take many such tests to find the major problems on a site.

And yes, the initial stuff may not be what you'd imagine is in a usability test, but the point is, we want to get inside our customer's heads and be them for a moment. This is how that's done.

The result? Usually it's a jaw-dropper. A wow moment. Usually, they spot something we hadn't seen, or give us insight into something we can do that will really help our business. Remember they are testing with real-life computers in near-real situations.

Usability testing is an incredible way to build competitive advantage. After all, that person who has had the sleepless night and is trying to book a flight fast will use the first site that works. Let that be yours.

Within usability are two additional areas of focus (which I personally find interesting). The first is accessibility, which on the web is primarily about people with various levels of visual impairment, dyslexia, and colour blindness.

The other is internationalisation. Many people who visit your site have English as a second language. How important is it to you to handle that? Could you double your sales if, for instance, you served your site in French or Spanish too?

Here's one other thing in this section. Display flexibility. Websites are unique in that the way they are displayed should change to suit the proportions of the screen they are being displayed on. That's completely different to any other visual medium: eg. print, television, or film. Graphic designers tend to want to fix the positions of everything. On the web, we should be flexible and design a 'liquid' layout that changes according to the user's screen. Don't force your web developer to fix things in position, it's not how the web works.

## Know your market

Actually there are two things combined here. The first is marketing research. On the web, you can find out so much about what you're about to do with just a little bit of market research that it's almost criminal to create your business without knowing exactly what's going to happen.

For instance, using something like WordTracker you can see how many people search for different keyphrases. You can use Adwords to drive traffic for your chosen keyword to a basic page, and there you have it .. you know the traffic, and you know about conversion. You know lots more about your business than anyone opening a retail shop could possibly know.

Great ideas are easy, and very, very tempting to develop. But do the market research first, it could save you a lot of investment in an idea no-one else cares about.

The other side of 'know your market' is knowing your audience. It's a quick and glib thing to say to anyone writing or creating anything for publication that they should know their audience, but it's absolutely key. You have to write to your audience, and it often helps to create a fictitious person who has the attributes of your market.

If you're writing to homeless people, or architects, or busy mums, or drum n bass lovers, or fly fishing enthusiasts, or racing car drivers, would there actually be any similarities in the way you write, or in the way the site looks or behaves? Those sites would be completely different.

So the audience you're aiming at has the power to completely change your whole approach. They are important, then.

So before you do anything, you need to research this. Find out what your audience is like. What the issues are. What gets them excited. Look in magazines, in forums. Ask around. Spend time on this.

## Use great photography (and video)

Use the best photography you can get. Nothing substitutes for it. It's persuasive. It's worth the money. Just do it. Your photographs probably aren't good enough.

Video is becoming enormous online. YouTube is the second biggest site on the Internet in terms of traffic. You can generate enormous traffic to your site with video, and you can persuade people to buy with video. What else are tv ads?

So start thinking video. Not sales stuff, but instructional. What short, snappy how-to's can you create and upload that will point to your site and bring targeted, switched on visitors?

## Use web 2.0 principles, a lot

So what's Web 2.0? I don't like the term, personally, but it's shorthand for the second wave of websites we are experiencing that aim to make the web less of a place for geeks and more of a place for everyone, and to make the web more participatory.

YouTube is a great example. In two years it's now got twice the traffic of Google. Hang on. Did you get that? Twice the traffic of Google. So. YouTube has twice the traffic of Google (twice .... of Google!) and we, together, put our videos online. Not the BBC. Us. OK sure there's plenty of copyrighted stuff there too. But it's a perfect participatory website. Nowadays, people don't watch tv, they spend the evening watching short snippets of video on YouTube. They design their own evening's telly and paste it together, ad hoc.

Wikipedia: an encyclopedia we all build together.

Flickr: the world's photograph repository.

Squidoo: where you can publish an article on anything you like (almost) and make money from it.

Social bookmarking sites like del.icio.us and digg, where you can store your bookmarks online where others can see them too. So when you bookmark, you contribute to the store of knowledge.

Rating stuff. Commenting on things. Answering online questions. These are all Web 2.0 things.

Social networking: mySpace, Facebook, Bebo. LinkedIn.

Blogging and podcasting

How do we use all this stuff? Well there's a lot to do here and there are some dangers, but basically don't shy away from it, pitch in, just behave well, be nice, contribute, and don't sell. Just be nice and help people. And every now and then, give a link to something helpful that happens to be something you would ultimately benefit from.

You are building trust, and then getting a link to your site. The whole thing can be seen as a link building strategy, but because all this space is policed, you just have to be nice and behave like a normal person. Selling will get you kicked out.

That's not all. You can use Web 2.0 principles on your own site. Set up a wiki or a discussion board. Let visitors vote on your pages, comment on your blog, rate things, review products. Let your customers in, let them participate.

## Your website should do something useful

We are beyond the point where a website is a novelty. Websites are only interesting because they do something useful. Think of your website as being like a hole-in-the-wall cash machine. No-one cares about it. They come to it to get a job done, and then they leave. Customers expect it to work and other than that, they simply don't care.

So. On that high note, what reason are we going to create for people to come to our website? It has to do something people want. For instance, I could order my groceries online, buy clothes, or sort out my finances.

It's OK to have a website for your dress shop. And yes, people will find you who wouldn't have otherwise.

But what if we made it possible for people to register their size and their colour palette (eye/hair/skin colour), their preferred neckline, age, and so on and we were able to let them know when we had new stock that would suit?

We could make that interactive: let the customer remove stuff from a big list, and gradually build up a profile. We could end up selling our customers all their clothes if we get that right.

What about the art gallery that lets people choose artwork by colour, to match the living room?

Another fairly unappetising buzzword is a mashup, where you take data from two sources and combine them, for instance, data from the local traffic report and Google maps and show one on top of the other for your local area. A number of large websites (Google, Amazon, eBay) are opening up their innards so programmers can take various data feeds and mix them up. What does your market want, in a perfect world? Maybe we can get close.

## Be different

For me this goes back to the old Tom Peters days where businesses were encouraged to differentiate themselves from their competition, often using information. For instance, two apples. One's a standard one, the other is organically produced by smiling farmers, it's a particular variety that tastes better and it volunteered to be on your plate and so on. Yes the two products are different (that's because the business owner that produced the second apple made themselves different), but also because of the information delivered

alongside the apple. We may not have noticed the difference without the information that came with it.

The Internet is an information medium. So it's ideal for helping you help your customers to realise how special you are.

But there's something else too.

Let's imagine you sell car insurance. Your first thought might be to write a website that attracts people who type 'car insurance' into Google.

There are some problems with that. Firstly, that's a very competitive thing to try to do. You'll be up against the biggest and the best. Do you have the resources for that? You'd better be able to provide a world class service to everyone who types in 'car insurance'.

Here's another thing. A rule of thumb that goes like this "people who search using one or two words are just researching, three or more words they are buying".

You've done this yourself. If you type in 'car insurance' you might get insurers from other countries, or discover that actually there's too much to choose from, what you want is 'cheap car insurance' or 'any driver car insurance' or 'jaguar car insurance' or 'pay monthly car insurance' or 'car insurance with breakdown cover'. And substitute 'motor' or 'auto' for car. Then start adding regions.

They call this the long tail. At first glance all the traffic happens around the term 'car insurance', but actually, there are a gazillion other terms, all individually providing small amounts of traffic, but adding up to much more than the main terms. Plus, these long tail terms are buying terms, not researching ones.

So which to choose?

You have to know yourself. If you can offer great 'cheap car insurance' then go for that. If you know you're not the cheapest but you tend to convert a lot of young drivers, or Rover drivers, or whatever, there's your foot in the door.

Specialise. Dominate a niche market.

Then specialise in more things.

If you get a few front page listings for a few long tail insurance phrases, you are building a reputation with Google, and that makes it easier to go for other phrases that are slightly more competitive.

## Conclusion

Just today I heard someone say that programmers are notorious for not helping you think. That's where I'm different. I've spent a lot of time as a marketer, a lot of time as a web programmer, and now I combine that with Internet marketing. And I spent all that time as a

self-employed businessman. So I know what's possible, what's necessary, and I know how to build it and make it work.

Actually, there's another thing, another reason I wrote this document, and it's this. As humans, our most used sense is our sight. We judge using our sight first, and with a website that's almost all there is to go on. So when you're judging websites, it's quite likely you'll judge on how good it looks.

Do you see 'graphic design' anywhere above? I think it's there, but it's not one of the ten key principles. It might help with conversion. It might help you differentiate. It could equally harm your findability, your usability, your accessibility, and your flexibility. And if you spend money on looking good at the cost of functionality, then you're in a mess.

That there are ten things more important than how a website looks is a big and complex argument to make. So that's why I wrote it down. It's not the only reason, just one.

What this does, however, is it gives you a set of criteria upon which to judge a website, or a proposal for one, or a website provider.

It's also an ideas list for your own website. You could probably run through this list with any site and come up with fifty action items, each of which will increase your business.

And here's the thing. Let's call this a bonus principle:

## Bonus principle: Use compound interest

You've probably been shocked and awed by the compound interest financial computations where you invest a penny today and in forty years time you're a millionaire. Well it works on the web too, like this.

If you have 100 visitors to your website every day and sell one item, and then you double your traffic, you'll double your sales.

If you double your conversion too, you'll get four sales.

And if you put in place some method for selling related products either at the same time or later, perhaps you'll get eight sales.

If you work out where your buyers are coming from and double those, maybe you'll get sixteen sales.

And if you differentiate and become the expert in your niche, perhaps you'll be the market leader and get thirty two sales.

Each small thing you do to improve your online business compounds with the other things you do. It's an effect that starts small and you just have to keep at it, but can become very powerful.

I'm spent. You've had the best of me. My life's work is summarised here in ten principles.

Use them, enjoy them, be inspired by them. Then call me and let's work together :-)

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