

e-commerce - a Guide to Trading Online

According to the latest UK statistics, total weekly UK online retail sales currently exceed £7bn.

As well as the domestic market, the internet provides a gateway to the international market place. Furthermore, it can be used to develop relationships with suppliers and other trading partners. It is therefore vital that your business has an online presence.

This can be anything from a one page 'shop-front', to a complex product catalogue with online ordering and multi-currency payment systems linked to a back-end stock control and accounting system.

Issues to consider

e-commerce does not have to be either expensive or complicated, but as with all aspects of business, there are a number of areas which need to be considered:

- register the company name or trading name as a domain name (this will incur an annual fee) along with the most appropriate, available, extension(s). For many businesses a.co.uk extension will be perfect, but others may want to use location specific extensions, such as.london, or, business sector specific extensions, such as.plumbing
- set up a project plan, with timescales, milestones and budgets
- have a look at other websites, particularly direct competitors. Get an idea of the look and feel, general navigation, and the ordering and payment process. Incorporate the good points into your site
- start having a look around for hosting providers, web developers/graphics designers, and online payment merchants
- bear in mind that some or all of your existing systems may need to be changed to facilitate ease of integration into the website
- If the product/service catalogue needs to be kept up to date consider the ease of being able to update the website content yourself, without relying on a third party
- have the website optimised to ensure that it features in popular search engines

- keep the site simple, fast and easy to use. Visitors will not spend ages trying to find things, or waiting for pages to load. Most visitors do not like pop-ups or other intrusive advertising banners either
- ensure that you can generate regular statistics on number of visitors, pages visited etc
- have a contingency plan to ensure that online trading can continue should there be a major problem.

Legal requirements

There are quite a few legal issues to contend with, some of these will not be relevant in all cases. Who legally owns the website (and the content) and what happens if either the web developer/ISP ceases trading? Ensure that both the website and any online payment procedures have all available security measures in place to prevent fraud, hacking and denial of service threats.

Compliance with relevant legislation, which includes:

- Companies Act 2006
- E-Commerce regulations 2002
- Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations 2003
- Consumer Contracts and Consumer Credit regulations
- Data Protection Act 1998
- Disability Discrimination Act 2005
- The Provision of Services Regulations 2009.

Bear in mind that regulations incorporated within primary legislation can and do change over time. For example, the Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations were updated to incorporate rules on marketing companies displaying their telephone number.

Also be aware that business and consumer trading laws, privacy and security laws, and VAT regulations differ between countries.

How we can help

If you would like any further assistance please do not hesitate to contact us.