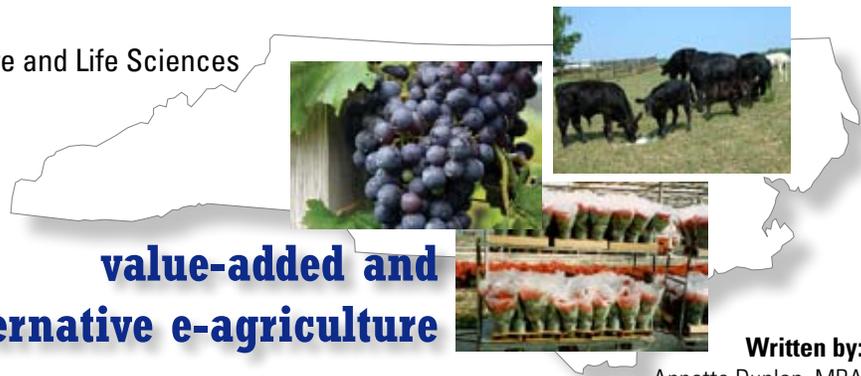# How to Start an E-Commerce Web Site

value-added and alternative e-agriculture

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OVERVIEW

The Internet is rapidly becoming the primary tool that many business people are using to reach their customers. Regardless of the size or type of your enterprise, the flexibility offered by a web site helps you tell people about your operation, and even to transact business. This checklist is designed to help you organize your efforts to secure a website, and to guide you in the decisions you make about this potentially effective marketing tool.

PICKING A DOMAIN NAME

A domain name is your "signature" on the Internet. Since this is how people think of your business, your domain name should contain as much of your regular business name as possible. If your business name has already been taken by another enterprise, consider using a different suffix, such as '.biz' instead of '.com'. Another approach is to shorten your name. For example, Sunny Creek Farm could become 'sunnycreek.com'. Or, add a geographic identifier to your domain name, such as 'sunnycreekfarm-nc.com.'

REGISTERING A DOMAIN NAME

Domain names are acquired through authorized domain name registrars. All registrars have access to the same list of reserved names, but they may have different fee structures. Some of the registrars are partnered with web hosting sites, and bundle the registration fee with the web host fees. The best way to learn more about securing a domain name is to consult http://www.internic.net/, which is operated by the U.S. Department of Commerce and holds the licensing authority for domain name registrars.

FINDING A WEB HOST

The North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services provides free web hosting and a design template at no charge for producers. This is a good opportunity to get a sense of how much activity a web site will generate before you spend money on both web hosting and web design. The tool can be accessed at: http://ncagr.com/ncproducts/CultivateStart.asp You do not have to have your own domain name to use this service.

If you want to have a web presence that offers more than just basic information to the customer, you will need a web hosting service. (A web site to help you choose the best service is listed in the Resources section below.) Most web hosting services are now very reasonably priced, but price alone should not be your critical decision criterion. The host's reliability and dependability are essential, because you want to be able to take advantage of the "24/7" nature of the Internet, with a minimum of interruptions. Bandwidth is another criterion. The wider the available band-width, the faster your site will download. If your site has a large number of pictures, then you will want sufficient band-width for efficient downloading.

If you intend to use your web site for business transactions involving payment by customers, then you want a hosting package that includes space on a secured server. (You can tell whether or not you have accessed a secured server by checking the URL. 'https', instead of 'http', is the indicator that the site is housed on a secured server.) Secured servers are servers that contain additional layers of encryption to protect the identity of the individual and the data that is being transacted from unauthorized access.

WEB DESIGN

A web page is actually a computer program that contains the code that creates the site you view. Most web hosting services now offer web design templates as part of their hosting packages so that even the most novice web designer can create a simple web site.

Microsoft's FrontPage and Dreamweaver are user-friendly web design software products that individuals can purchase

for web design. These products offer design tools that can help you develop a very professional-looking site.

There are also web designers who design web sites for a fee. Many of these designers expect their customers to use their web hosting services, and some designers physically control the web pages they have designed, a tactic that prevents their customers from making changes to the web content themselves. If you are considering using the services of a web design firm, check out the terms of the contract you will be asked to sign.

FINANCIAL TRANSACTIONS ON THE WEB

Conducting financial transactions, or e-commerce, on the web can help you capture business that you might otherwise miss. In addition to having access to a secured server, you will need to design a transactions page that collects the customer's financial information, transmits it to a service that can verify the transaction, and stores the data in your files.

E-commerce services provide you with the web tools and the "back office" transactions to process on-line payments. Since the majority of these payments are made with a credit card, you will need to set up a merchant account, either with the company that will handle your transactions, or with your bank. The credit card processor gets a fee, usually a certain percentage of each transaction amount. Remember to take this fee into consideration as you set your prices. To learn more about e-commerce rankings, visit http://ecommerce-software-review.toptenreviews.com/.

SEARCH ENGINES

A search engine, such as Google or Yahoo!, uses your web site's programming code, together with the content of your home page, to categorize your web site. Both of these major search engines use electronic tools to scan the millions of pages on the Internet and identify the 'key words' and 'meta tags' that determine the search terms that will help find your web site. (A Google search on 'meta tag' provides several helpful sites for ways to set up terms to help your web site be found.) You will want to make sure that you include meta tags and keywords in your program code.

LINKING YOUR SITE

Linking your site with other, already recognized, sites increases your chances of being found by both your prospects and by the search engines. NCDA&CS helps producers get traffic to their web site at no charge through the Goodness Grows General Store, http://www.ncagr.com/markets, and http://www.NCFarmFresh.com.

If you are a member of your local Chamber of Commerce, submit your URL to the Chamber to be added to their membership directory information. Check with other organizations where you are a member to learn whether or not you can put a link to your website on the organization's web site.

RESOURCES

www.internic.net – US Department of Commerce web site on Internet regulations

http://www.extension.org/entrepreneurship - A website designed by 70 of the nation's land grant universities to provide research-based information to consumers

http://ncagr.com/ncproducts/CultivateStart.asp - Web site provided by NCDA&CS for web page design for producers

http://www.cnet.com/4520-10192_1-5510570-1.html - Best practices guidelines for web host selection

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