

How to start a Fair Trade Internet-Based Business

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Starting a fair trade business can be very rewarding. Not only are you building a business, but also you're helping support thousands of artisans around the world who need a way to distribute their products.

If a bricks and mortar store isn't something you're ready for yet, or you're attracted to the way the Web can pull customers around the country and the world, an internet-based business might be a great way for you to begin your fair trade business.

Where do you start?

While all the details are too many to list, there are some straightforward questions you can ask yourself to begin. With some advance planning, launching an internet-based business can be both enjoyable and rewarding.

1) What do I want to carry on my website?

Answering this question will first help you determine your mix of products and from what suppliers you want / need to buy. It will also help you think of name options (and to see if they are available as a web address) and to think about the kinds of customers you want to reach.

2) Where can I secure a domain name?

A domain name is your address on the World Wide Web. Domains can be purchased inexpensively by visiting Yahoo.com, GoDaddy.com, NetworkSolutions.com, or another domain name source. It can be as inexpensive as \$1.99 to \$20.00 annually. Choose your name carefully; it should be easy to remember and spell correctly.

3) How do I secure a business license and tax ID number?

These are the same steps you would have to take no matter what type of business you create. Your city's Department of Revenue and the IRS will have more details on how to complete the process.

4) What type of image do I want to convey? What features will my website need?

Before you go hunting for a web designer, take some time to write down the types of products you want to carry (step #1), how you want them to appear on the site, and what feeling you want visitors have. Should the site feel young and hip? Grassroots and community-oriented? Corporate and polished?

In terms of products you are planning to feature, how many categories will you have? How many products will be featured in each category? How many variations of a product will you carry -- will each product need a drop down menu to indicate color choices, sizes, etc?

Other things to consider are: the type of payments you will accept and the merchant provider you will use to conduct transactions; whether you want to update the content on the site yourself or pay someone to do it; what type of shipping options will you offer (such as USPS, UPS, FedEx); how will you charge for shipping (a flat shipping fee per purchase total or by weight and/or geographic location or free shipping over a certain amount)?

Web designers are not mind readers, so the more information you have available to share with them, the better they will be able to help you develop the site you envision.

5) Who will design my site?

Once you have your architecture, look and feel, and features list in place, you will need to either secure a web designer or learn how to design a site yourself. While the cost of having a web site isn't necessarily comparable to the cost of starting a bricks and mortar business, you can expect to pay anywhere from under \$1,000 to several thousands to have someone design your website. If you decide to hire someone, do your homework and make sure you properly interview potential web designers. Ask what other sites they have designed, with what kind of organizations they have worked, in what kind of software they would be designing the site, how difficult is it to learn and manage, and other questions related both to their work and to what you will have to deal when they are finished. Also keep in mind that you are going to be working very closely with this person; your personalities need to be compatible if you're going to have a good working relationship.

6) How often will I update my site?

Consider how often you'll update your homepage, as well as your product selection. Just like a bricks and mortar retailer needs to "freshen" their window displays, merchandise displays and product selection often, a website can't be a "dead site" – one that isn't updated regularly or at all! Keep your inventory fresh and your displays exciting so visitors will keep coming back!

7) How will I tell the story behind my products?

Many producers and importers now have great photographs of products and their artisan partners – ask them for rights to use those images. If you don't have access to those images, make sure to take quality pictures. Unlike a retail store where a customer can touch, smell, taste or feel a product's uniqueness, you need to portray that feeling on the web through images and words.

8) What should I say on the site?

While a great picture can be worth a thousand words – your text shouldn't be nearly that long. Keep the descriptions interesting and include information on the artisan or group that produced the item. Basic product details like length of a necklace or size of the wall art are an absolute must. Remember, you're trying to sell your product! While the story behind the item is very important, at the end of the day, your customer is trying to buy something for themselves or a gift. The more detailed the information to make that decision, the better.

9) How will people find my website?

Once all of this is done, you're ready to go, right? Not so fast! You'll hardly have droves of customers if they have no idea you exist. Make sure your business plan has a marketing component that will detail how you plan to market your site (with a budget tied to your plan!). To promote a new website cost-effectively:

- Prepare a press release and send it to appropriate media (if your background isn't in this field, hire someone to help you do this).
- Develop a direct mail piece in Word or at a copy shop, such as a postcard, and send it to your friends and family. Encourage them to send it on to their friends and family. I printed 100 extra cards for each family and friend and asked them to share it with anyone they knew!
- Participate in events throughout your city and pass out postcards with your website's address and a special offer for visiting.
- Offer to speak at schools, your local church, women's groups – anyone who will have you in exchange of getting the word out about your website.

As we know, the demand for fair trade products exists. We just need to let our neighbors know how to find those great products and to share the story with their friends!

In addition to her fair trade e-boutique, www.World-Shoppe.com, Megy Karydes serves on the board of Chicago Fair Trade (www.ChicagoFairTrade.org) and assists clients with their marketing and public relations efforts through her consulting business, Karydes Consulting (www.KarydesConsulting.com). She can be reached via email at megy@KarydesConsulting.com.