

## TAKING THE BRAND ONLINE CULTIVATE YOUR ONLINE GARDEN

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Back in the late '90s, I'd often be asked to give speeches to Very Large Businesses - the kind of companies that bring their top sales execs to a "Chairman's Circle" retreat at a high-end resort. I'd fly in, eat dinner with the senior management, and in the morning I'd give a talk about the impact of the Internet on that particular business's industry. And whether I was speaking to an insurance company or a media conglomerate, my message was always the same: The Web is going to change your business, forever, and you better focus on understanding this new technology.

Now, this was ten years ago, mind you. In the intervening decade, large businesses have not only learned the Web, they've embraced it. They realize that they live or die by how their brand is expressed online.

But small business? That's another story. While every single Fortune 500 (and most likely, every Fortune 5000) company has a sophisticated website, Nielson Online reports in February 2008 that only 44% of small business do. And of those that do, my (admittedly anecdotal) experience is that the majority of SMB sites out there are, well, not particularly brand friendly, to put it mildly. Most of them are static brochures, devoid of personality and life.

What a shame! Or spun in the eternally optimistic world view of an entrepreneur... what an opportunity!

Most small business websites are not very good. That means you have a chance to really stand out. And that's a huge competitive advantage.

At this point you're probably rolling your eyes and saying "Yeah, right. Now I have to spend thousands of dollars making something that's just going to break in a few months, and then I'll have to pay another grand to fix it."

Not true. With small business and the web, the best way to start is to start small, and start social. Your business is a network of relationships - between vendors, clients, colleagues, and

co workers. So instead of worrying about boiling your website ocean, trying simmering the social seas instead.

Step 1: Head to [Wordpress](#) or [Moveable Type](#) and invest half an hour learning how to start a blog. Then start talking about your business. If you're not inclined, or that good at writing, find someone who is - a co worker, your spouse, your friend. But I'd trust yourself - you started this business, and my guess is that you talk about it all day long. Start talking about it online. Good things will start to happen.

Step 2: Branch out into social services, then integrate them into your blog. Again, invest half an hour figuring out Twitter, then do it again for Facebook. Once you have those presences figured out, you can use simple tools called plugins to integrate them both with your blog. Presto, you have now created a social ecosystem around your business!

Step 3: Find out where people are talking about your business (or your competitors!) and get involved there as well. If you haven't checked out what people are saying on [Yelp](#), [Yahoo Local](#), and similar services, you are doing yourself a major disservice. And if you haven't engaged with those services' [tools for merchants to respond](#), you're simply nuts.

Step 4: Integrate email. At every possible opportunity, you want to be gathering email addresses from customers, vendors, and colleagues. Email addresses are the business cards of the online world, and used properly, become a key way to get your online business ecosystem humming.

Step 5: Cultivate your ecosystem. A web presence, like a business, is a living organism that needs care and feeding. So get into the habit of tending to it every day. Add a blog post, then promote that post via email, Twitter and Facebook. Respond to a complaint or a compliment on a service like Yelp, then tell your ecosystem about your response. Find a new feature to roll out every week or so - both WordPress and Moveable Type have a wide array of nifty services and tools to chose from.

Lastly, note how your business does in search results. At first, your company's web presence will probably be non existent. But as you start to post, link to others, and amplify those postings with Twitter and Facebook, something wonderful will happen: your company will start to rank well in organic search - and that means new business leads for your business.

It will be hard at first, but remember, we're all social creatures. After a while, cultivating your online garden becomes not just good for business, it starts to get fun as well.