An introduction to the workings of the Internet for Small Businesses

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Chapter 1: What this book is all about

Introduction

The Internet has been around in pretty much its current form since the early 1990s, back then it was a mostly obscure niche plaything enjoyed by people who preferred speaking Klingon to each other and engaging in heated debates as to whether Captain Kirk was the only true captain of the USS Enterprise or had Jean-Luc Picard made it his own. Fortunately, (if not at least for the hairstyles of the time), the 1990s are now a distant memory, but the Internet has grown up considerably from those times. Yes, there are still arguments conducted in Klingon about all things Star Trek related, but nowadays the Internet (or web) has a far broader reach, people now for instance can (and do) spend hours on video sites like YouTube watching cats be wheeled around the room on automatic vacuum cleaners. Ah, progress!

On a more serious note however, the Internet has become in the intervening 25+ years, a place where people not only communicate, but transact business. Millions of companies have a presence on the Internet transacting billions of dollars of business on a monthly basis, from the behemoths (the names of which we are all too familiar with: Microsoft, Google, Apple, eBay, Amazon, the list is comprehensive), to the one-man band company operating out of a rented office in downtown Anytown, completing a couple of orders a week online, everyone is doing it. The question is how? How do these people manage to achieve this feat, they can't all be

computer scientists with nothing better to do with their time? To the uninitiated, the Internet may as well be magic – most people have no idea how it works, all they know is that they search for something and Google finds it, and if they want to watch a video then YouTube has it. And they can be quite content with that level of knowledge; the difference here is that you are a small business owner or manager, you are conducting business to some extent online, and if that revenue stream stops for whatever reason, your nerves are going to take even more of a hit than they do on a daily basis because you now have another problem to deal with, and with this one being related to the Internet, and it being magic, then you had better get to finding your wand pretty quickly!

While I cannot say that this book is the magic wand that you will be looking for in your hour of need, it can at least go some way to explaining - like the magic tricks of Penn and Teller and David Copperfield - it's not really magic (sorry if that has spoiled something for you), but with the correct knowledge, you can understand what is happening rather than being misdirected. This book is a high-level overview of the very basics that every small business owner or manager should know, so that informed and intelligent decisions relating to an Internet presence can be maintained without becoming lost in the mess of jargon and phrases and sometimes misinformation that is so easily gotten into when coming at this for the first time. This book can also serve as a high-level refresher for those of you who have been through the process before and just need to remind yourself of some topics.

And here you are, the proud owner of a book to make it all better and make the Internet suddenly completely understandable. While I can't promise that, I can say that if you are reading this for the first time, then by following through each chapter in sequence, you'll find that they build on the knowledge gained in the last, and by the end you'll at least be less daunted by the words and phrases and the "magic". Many will find that they will go through this book a couple of times, and that's fine, it is arranged in a way that you can jump in and out as required, so please, if that is your preference, use the book as a reference as opposed to a fixed beginning to end recipe. Jump around the chapters as you see fit, that works just fine too. Enjoy.

Why target small businesses?

So why then is this book aimed squarely at the small business owner/manager, rather than a more generic audience? Well, there is nothing to say that a more generic audience would not benefit from it, but experience shows that in the setting of a small business it is often the case that there really are too few people to be able to accomplish all of the tasks required, and quite often tasks such as the website and e-mail and so on are farmed out to "the IT guy", or some consultancy company or whatever the solution is. And this is absolutely fine at the outset, but IT people come and go, relationships with consultancies come and go, and sooner or later something needs to be dealt with. Everyone who set it up has moved on or their services are no longer used, the problem lands on the desk of the manager or owner – because let's face it, in a small business, all of the curly

problems end up there because you are supposed to know everything - with a solution expected whilst other people around the place are quite quickly falling into panic mode.

To be in that situation with absolutely no knowledge of where you are, nor an obvious (and not hugely expensive) way out is not ideal, and it is certainly not the time that you need to be cramming to obtain the knowledge that you need in order to move forward.

This book is not about delving into the very depths of exactly how the Internet works (although we will cover a little bit about it), you're not going to find yourself having to learn program code and you're not going to need to learn the model and serial numbers of loads of different components; instead, it will give you the grounding to understand that if a problem occurs, and the world is falling apart for your business at a spectacular rate, that you will at least be able to narrow down the possible causes of the problem and know where to look for a solution which will save you valuable time and money. Besides, it's just good stuff to know anyway.

The role of an 'IT guy'

Most of us know the IT guy: if you don't then you can quite often recognise them from some distance, mostly by the neckbeard, the geekily funny maths-related t-shirt, and the faint but lingering smell of pizza and coffee which seems to follow them around.

Despite the stereotypical image of your friendly geek there, they are very useful people to know as they do tend to know a reasonable amount of stuff about all sorts of things. Most IT people you meet (if they ever come out of their house that

is) will tell you that because they "work with computers" that they end up becoming responsible for, and garner a wealth of knowledge upon, everything that has a plug attached to it. This is not by choice on their part but the nature of your typical IT guy is that they learn new skills at a pretty decent rate, and will not be beaten by a problem. Hence, the random broken thing with a plug arrives, and rather than give it back, will learn why the thing is broken, and how to fix it.

Why does all this matter though, amusing as it is? Well, if you have your IT guy already, then what is the betting that everything that comes up – either with a plug or just techie related – will be handballed to that person without a second thought? It's almost always the case, and for the IT guy that's a great result: they are getting to learn about something new and you are paying them for it. Who could ask for more?

This is absolutely in no way a bad thing, having someone on the team that knows everything techie about your business and is willing to learn what they don't already know is an enviable situation for most businesses, and they are a quality asset. Whilst they are there. And that's where the problem starts: when your IT guy goes – and they will, eventually. IT guys tend to move around a bit and when they do, your training and the sum of your businesses techie knowledge walks out the door too.

Now you are back to zero. Well, not exactly zero, it's a bit worse than that in reality. Before your IT guy left, you had the conversation that went something like:

You: *"Be sure you note down absolutely everything we need to know before you go"*

And that's exactly what happened. Now you are staring at either a dog-eared, coffee-stained single side of A4 replete with seemingly random letters, numbers, symbols and phrases as well as assorted scrawled notes or, you have a tome the size of War and Peace that you've dragged out of the cupboard and dusted off which, in order to be understood, requires a degree in computer science just to get past the title.

And that's the time you realise that having a general understanding of the way in which the Internet works might be a decent bit of knowledge to have.

What you need to know, and what you don't

As a small business owner or manager, the knowledge you are going to need falls somewhere between "It's all made of magic" and being able to write a thesis on packet switching (of which, more later but fear not). You need to know enough to understand what the cryptic side of A4 notes might mean and where we might head in order to apply them, but not so much we get bogged down in the intricacies of every part of the Internet such that we never see the light of day again.

This book will get you to that stage: enough not to be confused by the technical bits, but not deep enough to be scary to the uninitiated.

A little bit of knowledge …

While it is the aim of this book to move you off of square one, we need to be careful. Knowing a little bit is very useful and can absolutely get you out of trouble and heading in the right direction, but this book is not the Internet start to

finish, it will not teach you everything and isn't designed to try. If your business world is falling apart by the minute or you are in the process of making big decisions for the future of the company you will still very likely be short of knowledge in key areas, and those situations are not the times to be running out of knowledge. You are more than likely still going to need professional assistance but at least when that outside assistance is consulted or employed, you will be able to communicate in a sensible manner and understand what each other wants and needs.