



USING HARDWARE AND SOFTWARE (IT) FOR YOUR BUSINESS

There's almost no-one nowadays who doesn't have a computer -- it's more-or-less a given that you've got a computer in your home office, and that you use it almost every day. But are you getting as much out of it as you could be? Here are some things your computer can do that you might not have thought of.

Keep Track of Customers in a Database.

Once you start to get some customers, you'll need to keep track of their contact details, as well as making sure you know who they are in case you forget. You have a choice: you can keep a file for each customer in your filing cabinet, or you could enter their details into a computerised database.

The good news is that if you have some office software, then you should already have a database package. Starting a database of your customers isn't too difficult to figure out, and lets you do all sorts of things -- you can sort them by the area where they live, or list everyone who's bought one of your products but not another, for example.

Graph Your Sales.

Once you've got your database telling you what you've sold to who and when, you can use it to produce all sorts of graphs and other reports that could help you to spot trends and see what works and what doesn't.

Do Your Accounting and Tax.

With inexpensive accounting software, it's not hard to use your computer to keep track of all your incomings and outgoings -- it can even be integrated with your customer database. Since you'll have all your sales data electronically already, it'll be a snap to do your taxes at the end of the year, where for people who have it all on paper it can be a complete nightmare.

Design Your Own Marketing Materials.

Modern desktop publishing software makes it dead easy to design your own logo, leaflets, brochures, and anything else you might want. With a little practise, you can produce things as good as any graphic designer a home business could afford, and save the money for distribution. Make sure you run your design by a few people first, though, to check that it's readable and there aren't any mistakes or flaws that you've been staring at it for too long to see.

Follow Market Trends.

With Internet access, you can read articles from the specialist press of the whole world, and keep up to date with all the latest technologies and trends in your industry. It's worth picking out the top five or so most important sites to your business and spending a few minutes each day checking them. After all, you don't want to get left behind.

Accept Credit Cards.

Many people don't realise, but Internet merchant accounts aren't just for accepting card payments over the web. You can also open one to use as part of your home business over the phone or by post, with you simply entering the card numbers and amounts into a website to process the payments. This is a powerful way of giving your customers more alternatives when it comes to paying you.

Promote Your Business.

Don't underestimate the effectiveness of the web as a tool for promotion. You should definitely take the time to list your business on every directory listing people in your industry -- make sure that someone searching for your profession and the town where you live would be able to find you listed easily.

Pay Your Staff.

When your business gets big enough to employ staff, you'll find your computer is a useful tool for keeping track of how many hours each person has worked, how much they should be paid, and how much of that amount needs to be kept behind as tax. Trying to do payroll manually is a big headache.

Keep Backups!

There's one thing, though, that it's important to always remember: when you use your computer to store any data that you can't afford to lose, make regular backups and keep them in a safe place. It's really not that much trouble, and if you don't do it then a simple computer failure can devastate your business.