

# Making the most of the Internet

**The Internet is a vast store of information and data. It is an incredibly useful business resource which can save you time and money.**

The briefing covers:

- What you can find online.
- How the Internet can save you money.
- Online networking.
- Researching competitors and using search engines.

## 1 Finding people and businesses

The Internet can help you forge useful new contacts with individuals and businesses.

### 1.1 Your business can use **social networking** websites.

- Social networking websites create connections between people.
- You can search for people you know on the site and 'add' them as your friends.
- The connections between you and the people you know constitutes your 'network'.
- Your network can include current and former colleagues, friends and clients. It all depends on who you want to communicate with and who is using that social networking site.
- The most well-known business-focused social network is LinkedIn ([www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)). Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)) is not used primarily for business, but is exceedingly popular.

### 1.2 Social networking websites make it **easy to connect** with new people.

- They can help with recruitment by providing word-of-mouth recommendations.
- For instance, you can send a message to your contacts explaining you are recruiting for a new project manager. Your contacts can pass your request on to their networks in order to try and find someone suitable.
- You can also create a network of customers or employees. For example, Facebook allows you to set up a network for your business which people can join to stay in touch with your company.
- Avoid the temptation to use your network to openly advertise your business. This is often frowned upon.

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### 1.3 There are many ways to **recruit new staff online**.

- Major recruitment sites like Monster ([www.monster.co.uk](http://www.monster.co.uk)), Jobsite ([www.jobsite.co.uk](http://www.jobsite.co.uk)), and TotalJobs ([www.totaljobs.com](http://www.totaljobs.com)) allow you to post job advertisements.
- These sites allow you to automatically filter applicants based on qualifications and experience, so you spend less time selecting candidates manually.
- There are many industry-specific recruitment sites which can help you target jobseekers with relevant experience. Search online (see 6) or ask an industry association to find yours.
- You can also advertise vacancies on your company website. See **Your website strategy**.

## 2 Purchasing online

The Internet makes it easy to compare prices for different items and place orders.

**2.1** When you know exactly what you need, you can use **comparison sites** to check prices at multiple retailers quickly.

- Try Kelkoo ([www.kelkoo.co.uk](http://www.kelkoo.co.uk)), PriceRunner ([www.pricerunner.co.uk](http://www.pricerunner.co.uk)) or Google Product Search ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)).

### Government information sites

**A Directgov** ([www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk)) is the main government information resource.

- You can access a wide range of news and services.

**B The Business Link site** ([www.businesslink.gov.uk](http://www.businesslink.gov.uk)) provides information on topics such as finance, marketing, finding premises, tax, grants and e-commerce.

- It also includes extensive links to other relevant sites.
- Sector-specific information is provided on a wide range of industries and services.
- Interactive tools are available to help you in areas such as finding the right finance for your business and working out your tax obligations.

**C HMRC** ([www.hmrc.gov.uk](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk)) allows you to view tax information and file returns online.

([www.monster.co.uk/products](http://www.monster.co.uk/products)) to search for the item you want.

- Be as specific as possible when using these sites. Input an exact product name or model number.
- Check that all prices include shipping, and that the item is in stock.

**2.2** The Internet is the ideal place to track down **unusual or niche items**.

- A simple search of what you are looking for often turns up a small retailer who can help.
- When dealing with an unknown supplier for the first time, search online for opinions of their business.
- Online auction sites like eBay ([www.ebay.co.uk](http://www.ebay.co.uk)) are good sources of one-off and specialist items.

**2.3** A great way to make informed decisions when purchasing items for your business is to track down **online reviews**.

- You can search online for reviews. For instance, to find a review of a printer, just type 'review of [printer model]' into a search engine.
- Amazon ([www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)) has thousands of reviews written by customers for products it sells. Ciao! ([www.ciao.co.uk](http://www.ciao.co.uk)) is another useful site for user-written reviews.
- For reviews written by professional reviews, Which? ([www.which.co.uk](http://www.which.co.uk)) is a good place to start. You have to pay around £10 a year for full access.
- Reviews may also be available on the websites of relevant magazines. For instance, for laptop reviews, try computer magazine websites.

**2.4** You can purchase **business travel** quickly and easily online too.

- To find good value flights, search aggregator sites like Kayak ([www.kayak.com](http://www.kayak.com)) and Skyscanner ([www.skyscanner.net](http://www.skyscanner.net)). These sites do not sell flights, but search websites which do in order to find the most competitive prices.
- You can often save with a flight and hotel package. Try Expedia ([www.expedia.co.uk](http://www.expedia.co.uk)), Opodo ([www.opodo.co.uk](http://www.opodo.co.uk)), eBookers ([www.ebookers.com](http://www.ebookers.com)) and Travelocity ([www.travelocity.co.uk](http://www.travelocity.co.uk)).

### 3 Join the conversation

The Internet enables anyone to publish articles, stories or comments online.

**3.1 Blogs and online forums** allow individuals to talk about absolutely anything.

- A blog is like an online diary. Anyone can create one for free using services like Blogger ([www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)), Wordpress ([www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com)) or LiveJournal ([www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com)).
- A forum is an online discussion area. Most forums allow anyone to sign up and join the conversation.

**3.2** There are almost certainly forums and blogs relevant to your **specific industry**.

- To find forums, use a standard search engine. For instance, to find a plumbing forum, you could type 'plumbing forum' into Google.
- Many discussions take place in discussion groups. You may have to join these in order to take part. Try Searching Yahoo! Groups (<http://uk.groups.yahoo.com>) or Google Groups (<http://groups.google.com>).
- You can use blog search engines like Technorati ([www.technorati.com](http://www.technorati.com)) and Google Blog Search ([www.google.co.uk/blogsearch](http://www.google.co.uk/blogsearch)) to find relevant blogs.
- Many trade associations operate online forums or discussion areas through which their members can connect.

**3.3** You can monitor blogs for mentions of **particular subjects**.

- For instance, people may be blogging about good or bad experiences with your company.
- You may want to check for mentions of your main competitors.
- Google Blog Search ([www.google.co.uk/blogsearch](http://www.google.co.uk/blogsearch)) allows you to set up saved searches.
- You can also use Google News ([www.google.co.uk/news](http://www.google.co.uk/news)) to set up a saved search for mentions of your company in the news.
- These services will email you each time a new item appears containing the term you entered.

**3.4** Do not be afraid to **take part** in online discussions.

- You can join most forums for free, though you will probably have to give your email address and other details.
- Most blogs actively encourage comments. If you have something of value to add, use the comment facility.
- However, be wary of overtly promoting your company in this way.
- Most discussion forums include a list of acceptable behaviour. Read this before taking part.
- A good way to promote your company is to answer queries and offer advice on forums. People will come to see you as an authority on that subject.

### 4 Research

The Internet is full of information which could be valuable to your business.

**4.1** It is easy to find out about **your competitors** online.

- Check your main competitor's websites regularly. Remember to sign up to any newsletter they offer.
- Search blogs and forums to see if they are mentioned (see **3.3**).
- Careful searching may allow you to identify some of a competitor's clients. You could then get your sales team to target them with special deals.
- Sites like Alexa ([www.alexa.com](http://www.alexa.com)) will give you indicative traffic levels for a competitor's website. For example, you can see if their site gets more visitors than yours.
- For more in-depth information about visitors to a competing site, you could consider purchasing data from a company like Hitwise ([www.hitwise.co.uk](http://www.hitwise.co.uk)).

**4.2** You can get information about **other businesses** like new clients or prospective partners.

- Online credit checking services like Experian ([www.experian.co.uk](http://www.experian.co.uk)) and Equifax ([www.equifax.co.uk](http://www.equifax.co.uk)) allow you to assess the creditworthiness of potential customers.
- The Companies House database is online and fully searchable with details of company directors and accounts ([www.companieshouse.gov.uk](http://www.companieshouse.gov.uk)).

**4.3** There is a wealth of **legal and regulatory information** available online.

- Industry trade bodies and associations often publish information on regulations and how they will affect businesses like yours.
- You can also check reputable sites like Out-Law ([www.out-law.com](http://www.out-law.com)) for legal information.
- However, be wary of relying on legal information you have found online. Always consult your lawyer too.

#### 4.4 Organisations and businesses often make **research findings** available free of charge.

This can help you take advantage of economic or industry changes.

- The British Chambers of Commerce ([www.britishchambers.org.uk](http://www.britishchambers.org.uk)) and Federation of Small Businesses ([www.fsb.org.uk](http://www.fsb.org.uk)) offer advice and information.
- National Statistics publishes a wealth of useful data online ([www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk)).

## 5 For your website

There are lots of online resources that can help improve your own website.

### 5.1 Find **pictures** in online image libraries.

- You can find free photography on stock.xchng ([www.sxc.hu](http://www.sxc.hu)) and Flickr ([www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)).  
Not all images on these sites are available for free use, so always check the terms for each photo carefully.
- iStockphoto ([www.istockphoto.com](http://www.istockphoto.com)) and Shutterstock ([www.shutterstock.com](http://www.shutterstock.com)) make millions of images available at a low cost. They have powerful search functions to help you locate the shot you need.

### 5.2 **Republish content** from other sites.

- Some websites will allow you to republish their articles.
- At minimum, they will normally request a link back to their site from yours.
- This can be a good way to provide additional value to your visitors.
- Always ask permission to use articles. If you spot content you would like to use, approach the site owners.

### 5.3 Get **search engine optimisation** data.

- Sites like Keyword Discovery ([www.keyworddiscovery.com](http://www.keyworddiscovery.com)) and WordTracker ([www.wordtracker.com](http://www.wordtracker.com)) can show you what people type into search engines.
- You can then optimise your own website

for the most common terms.

- See **Search engine optimisation**.

## 6 Using search engines

Search engines are the main way people find information online.

The number of results for any query can be daunting. Luckily, there are some ways to home in and find the information you need.

### 6.1 There are some **basic search operators** which can produce a more specific set of results.

- Search operators tell the search engine to narrow or broaden the search.
- For instance, if you enter a search term in quotes (""), most search engines will only return pages which contain that exact term.
- Putting a plus sign (+) in front of a word usually tells the search engine that all results must contain that word. Similarly, a minus sign (-) means pages containing that term will be excluded.
- Each search engine will list its search operators in the help section.

### 6.2 Use the **advanced search**.

- Most search engines offer an 'advanced search' page.
- These will allow you to narrow your results further.  
For instance, you can search only a specific websites, or websites located in a particular country.

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