



64 Digital Web Startups guide

Launching an online startup is tough. You'll have to worry about funding, company setup, hiring staff, office space, sales... and plenty more.

We can't help you with any of that, but we can help you launch your perfect website or mobile app with the minimum of stress and give you the maximum chance of success.

Whether you're launching an ecommerce store, online service, social network, mobile app or community site, the advice below has been cobbled together from our own personal experience of helping more than 50 startups find their feet online over the last 10 years or so.

Have a good business plan, but be prepared to throw it in the bin

It's important to start any new venture with a great business plan, but the web moves at an astonishing pace and it's not unusual to see a successful startup change direction soon after launch because people were using their product or service in unexpected ways. You'll get lots of feedback after launch, and you'll need to react positively.

So, you'll need to start with a detailed business plan, including good revenue predictions and traffic estimates, but if something isn't working or you think of new features or a better revenue model then don't feel the need to doggedly stick to your original plan. In the digital world that just doesn't work.

Get your product out there

This might sound contradictory, we've just told you to be prepared to throw all your plans in the bin, but don't do it before you've got something out there in the wild. We've seen too many companies make several u-turns during the design and development phase and take far too long to get their website or app launched.

It's great to take on feedback and adapt your plans once you know how people are using it and what they think of it, but while you're in development it's usually best not to derail a project and delay the release unless it's really important. Save up your ideas and release new features shortly after launch if you have to. If in doubt, release early and often, and if you don't know what a "Lean Startup" is then get reading... http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lean_Startup





Don't blow all your cash at once!

It sounds silly, but so many founders plan to spend the majority of their budget all at once on building the first version of their website or app.

Aside from the fact that any digital product launch is an iterative process (so you'll need to budget for ongoing development, new features and improvements), it's important to allocate an adequate slice of your budget for marketing. Unfortunately it's all too common for us to speak to people who think that just by putting their site on the web or their app on an app store that people will automatically find it and use it. They expect that they'll magically be number 1 on Google for their key search terms or their idea will "go viral" overnight.

That might happen, but it's not a solid business plan, so think about (and ask your agency) how much you'll need to allocate to SEO, paid search, social marketing and offline PR to build your audience.

Think about how your site or app will scale

Nobody knows how successful their idea is going to be, but it's important to think about how successfully it MIGHT be and plan accordingly.

If your idea is hugely popular then how will your website and your hosting hold up? Are your technology choices easily scalable and will you be able to support a large number of users with automated process or will you find yourself suddenly looking for more funding and spending all your time hiring staff? It's a nice problem to have of course but it's worth planning for.

Technology wise, if you're running a website you should be thinking about cloud hosting. If you're launching an app then you won't have to worry about distributing it to a large number of people because app stores are built for it, but many apps rely on a back-end system which needs to be on scalable hosting. It's also worth noting that cheap hosting is nearly always a false economy.





Start with a small feature set

This is similar to “get your product out there”. The key point is that most successful online startups choose to do one thing and do it very well. If you have too many ideas then it’s best to focus your development efforts on the core features which you think will draw people to your project. If you stuff too many features in which not many people will use you and don’t execute them well then you’re wasting time, money and muddying the water. What is it about your idea that is great and how can you make it as slick and polished as possible?

Be realistic about your potential audience and pricing model

How many users do you need and how much revenue do you need to generate per user for your idea to become profitable. If you need a million users paying £100 a month to break even then it probably isn’t going to work. If you only need 800 paying customers averaging £15 a month to break even (to begin with at least) and you’ve got a great idea, then you’re in with a shot.

It’s an important calculation, often done on the back of a cigarette packet and often wildly inaccurate. Maybe you don’t need to make a profit for your idea to work. Facebook and Twitter never have, but most startups do, and it’s important to be realistic about your commercial goals.

How are you going to reach critical mass?

Most websites and apps rely on a community, whether that’s a community of like-minded individuals with a common interest, or a community of buyers and sellers, a dating site, or a business group, most websites need to foster a healthy community to succeed.

In our experience the biggest thing that most online startups struggle with is reaching a critical mass with their community. There’s no point having lots of people trying to buy things and no traders selling anything, or a forum which only has 10 members who don’t have much to talk about. So, if your idea needs to reach a critical mass to succeed then you’re going to have to start things off with a bang. Offering discounts to early users, a launch PR campaign, coupon codes, whatever it takes to reach critical mass and create a vibrant community.





Don't reinvent the wheel

If some of the functionality of your website or app has already been built then you should think about piggybacking on services that already exist. Many a successful startup has been built on the back of other service's APIs: Foursquare was built on top of Google Maps, Tweetdeck utilises twitter and thousands of websites use Facebook or OpenID logins instead of building their own authentication system.

You can use services like Lyvefire and Disqus to run a comments system and services like Mailchimp or Sendgrid to run your email infrastructure (for email marketing).

Make sure you do your competitor research properly

There's nothing more annoying than coming up with a great idea and finding out too late that somebody else is already doing it and doing it better. Very few people have a totally original idea and you don't have to (you just need to be better at it and good at marketing), but it's important to understand who's in your space so you know who you're competing with. Some of the best startups simply combine the best ideas from their main competitors.

Try to give your idea a viral slant

It's easier than ever for people to share things they like with friends online, with Facebook, Twitter and new social networks such as Pinterest, any new project has a much higher chance of taking off if people like it and share it with their peers so allow people to do this easily.

What do we mean by this? It could be as simple as allowing people to share their comments or purchases on social networks, or you might provide incentives such as discounts or extra features for those that promote your product for you.

As we said earlier, you can never rely on the viral effect as your only marketing tool, but you stand a higher chance of reducing your marketing costs if you can convince people to do it for you.

Think about PR

PR is vastly underrated when launching a startup, especially offline PR.

You don't want your idea to launch with a whimper and getting it featured in national or





specialist magazines, or in front of influential bloggers or Tweeters can be invaluable in building a buzz around your product.

It's going to take time

Don't expect success overnight. Many very successful websites took a while to build a community. Even if your site or app does "go viral" it's still rare for it to happen overnight, so make sure your plans, and specifically your budgets, give you a fair amount of room for maneuver.

Offer great service

People will talk about your product, publicly. They'll leave reviews on review sites, discuss you on twitter and talk about you to their friends and if they get bad service it won't be pretty. If you're launching an app on Apple's app store or Google Play then bad reviews will be the death of the app.

A good experience however will result in more than just good reviews and flattering comments on social networks. People will blog about you and link to your site, giving you an SEO boost and a PR boost in one hit.

Test, test and test again

We don't just mean proper testing for bugs before releasing (that should be a given), we mean experiment with ideas and analysing the results to inform the decision making process. We always advocate a scientific approach to testing and basing your decisions on empirical evidence.

Tools like Google Analytics and conversion rate optimization software will tell you exactly what your users are doing, which features work well and which don't. There's always a place for "gut feeling" but split testing and analysis is so easy nowadays that no startup should really be blindly making decisions on design and functionality.

Track everything

In addition to experimenting and analysing the results, it's important to track absolutely everything, especially when it comes to marketing efforts.

If you're spending money on SEO, or running PPC campaigns on Google or Bing then it's





absolutely imperative that you know what's working and what's not. Get your maths hat on and understand how to interpret the wealth of data these services can supply, or make sure you're using an agency that understands them for you, it could save you a fortune.

What's the best platform for your idea?

This might sound like a silly question, but would your idea work best as a website, accessed mainly from desktop PCs, or are people more likely to use it on the move? Is it best to have a website AND a companion mobile app, or perhaps a Facebook app, or.... you get the idea.

It's important to understand your potential audience and how they'll want to access your service. Where will they be and what equipment will they be using?

Solve a problem

Necessity is the mother of invention, or so they say. So what problem does your idea solve and why would anybody use it? Are you the only person with this problem, or do you think there are hundred of thousands out there like you that are just waiting for your solution.

Nearly every successful startup solves a problem, either by allowing people to communicate in new ways, get access to information they couldn't get or by making their life easier or less stressful in some way. So, ask yourself if your idea has an audience and what problem it solves for them.

Make use of cheap online tools

There is a wealth of great, cheap online tools that can save you an enormous amount of time in administration, communication and organization of your new business, so use them!

Here are just a few...

Team working: Basecamp, Huddle, PBworks

Organization: Workflowy, Remember the Milk

Customer Support & Feedback: Zendesk, Survey Monkey, Get Satisfaction

Customer Relationship management: Capsule CRM, SugarCRM





Accounting: Freshbooks, Xero

Email and Office: Google Apps, Zoho

The cheapest is rarely the best

If you're serious about your business then try not to cut corners. It's easy to make cost saving by using cheap technology, outsourcing the design and build of your project abroad or doing things yourself which might be better done by a professional.

Budgets are always tight when you're starting a new business, but if you're launching a technology product then don't scrimp on the technology, you'll want it delivered on time and you'll want it to work.





Partner with the right technology company

Obviously we're biased here, but if you're going to rely on an agency to build your website or web app for you (which is usually the sensible choice) then you need to know you can work well with them. Obviously, they need to be able to show that they can help you achieve what you want to achieve on a technical level, but they also need to be able to demonstrate that they're on the same wavelength as you and that they will communicate well and manage your project efficiently.

If you'd like to talk to us about how we can help you make a success of your website or build the next great mobile app then we'd love to hear from you. Give us a call on 0800 564 2253 and we'll see how we can help, even if it's just a bit of friendly advice.

