

First Contact

One person's answer to the question:

"Okay. I have a business of my own. How do I get in touch with other business people online about possible deals without spamming them?"

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Introduction

That's easily one of the most common questions I get when I talk to people about doing business online.

Usually the question is asked in a belligerent, "Who do you think you are telling me what I can and can't do online?" tone.

My response to that is usually: "I'm just telling you what won't work. Would you like to know what will?"

They rarely do.

I don't know why I even bother with those people. They're going to do it their way, just to prove that they can. Then, when they flop, they'll be the first to tell everyone they know, in dreadfully ominous and all-knowing tones, that the Internet is ***"A Waste of Time for Serious Businesspeople.®"***

Occasionally, the person asking is sincerely looking for a real and useful answer. This article is for those folks, the ones who really want to know how to do it right, and get results.

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First things first: This isn't the only way that you could do this. It's just how I do it. You may come up with a system that works better for you, but read these ideas first and take them seriously. They work, and they'll save you a lot of trouble.

Experiment with changes and variations in small doses to make sure you're improving on the system, rather than opening yourself up to a lot of headaches.

This process is the result of a lot of practice and testing. Mine, and that of a lot of other people who've been kind enough to share their experience with me.

Getting Started

The first step is to know exactly what you want. Are you looking for affiliates for your new program? Referrals for your service? Reviews for your product? A solo mailing to the site owner's list? Publishers to whom you can submit articles on a regular basis?

Define it. Be precise, and know what criteria you'll use to measure your progress.

For example, if you're looking for affiliates, know what kind of traffic you want your affiliates to be able to offer, and what average monthly production you need from each.

Yes, you can develop your program through the usual channels, without active hunting for partners. That's the slow and uncertain way to do it. Actively seeking the better partners is a much surer way to succeed in the long run.

And, of course, you need to define how many partners you want for this stage of your program's development.

Another example: Let's say you're looking for publishers to submit articles to. In this case you're interested in getting your information in front of a very specific audience. The folks that want the products or services you provide. Your articles should be tailored to that group, and you should have a specific end result in mind when you write them.

You want publishers who are likely to actually run your material, and you want a certain level of exposure, measured in total number of subscribers seeing your articles each week or month.

Be specific, or, to use a common programmer's phrase: Define your output.

Who Are You Looking For?

The next step will seem obvious, but don't rush through it. This is where the majority of the success of the process lies.

Know your target market. Spot on, down to the smallest detail.

Your target market is NOT the site owner or publisher. It's the person who is likely to buy your product or use your service.

Repeat: Your target market is NOT the site owner or publisher.

Define your target market precisely. And don't kid yourself. There are only two products that EVERYONE needs: Air and water.

I heard that, and it's not true. Food is a whole lot of different products, and no-one needs all of them.

Cheeseburgers are food. Allegedly, so is tofu.

Different markets.

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Who wants the benefits your product offers enough to pay the price you're asking for it? What characteristics do those people have in common? More importantly, what behaviors do they have in common?

That's your target market.

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Why are behaviors more important than characteristics?

Glad you asked. And a very astute question, I might add. Let's use a couple of real world examples. First, let's look at computer gamers.

Characteristics: Typically male, between 15 and 45. Imaginative, literate, and inventive, with lots of time on their hands. Generally with higher than average IQs.

General behaviors: They buy computers, talk to other gamers, and want the very coolest and newest hardware.

Specific behaviors: They buy computer games and game machines.

Knowing the characteristics will help you in crafting your ads, but in this case, it's a bit too wide for making a media match with a high response rate.

Knowing the general behaviors will help you to narrow the field to those areas with a higher probable response rate. If you can't get access to an audience with the group's specific behavior patterns, the general ones may offer a narrow enough profile.

In this case, you can get directly to the market, by going after contacts who have direct access to game buyers.

That's sort of a classic case. Almost a no-brainer. But what about the less obvious stuff that most businesses deal with?

Well, let's take a really different product, and see how we'd figure the market. How about ... fortune cookies?

This is not an imaginary case. One of our subscribers, a very nice guy named Mike Fry, runs a company called Fancy Fortune Cookies. His URL is <http://www.FortuneCookiesOnline.com>

Mike specializes in fortune cookies that have different colors (9) and flavors (12). And they come with customized fortunes, rather than the usual dull, routine stuff you get in cheap Chinese restaurants. You can design the fortunes yourself, or his staff will help you with them.

BTW, they've had them at two separate events I've attended. They're reaaally good. And no, I'm not getting paid to say that. Mike didn't even know I was going to use him as an example. His situation is just perfect for making the point. The fact I really liked the cookies doesn't hurt.

This is a fairly "different" product. So, who is Mike's target market? Let's start with characteristics:

Innovative. Usually folks who do things with a flair.

Hmmm. That's not a lot to go on, is it?

How about their general behaviors? They put on "Events." They take an active role in making sure they get attention and are remembered. They work at entertaining their guests.

Okay. That helps, but it's still kind of a wide market to go after. They're a small part of any group, but probably not enough to make advertising with such general media worthwhile.

Specific behaviors? Here's where it becomes clear. I once asked Mike what people used his fortune cookies for, and found that he had a really clear grasp of his target market. He reeled off a bunch of specific "behaviors" common to his customers.

I don't recall the order he said they were ranked in, but here are a few of the main ones:

- Tradeshows
- Business seminars and company get-togethers
- Website promotions
- Conventions
- Class reunions
- Wedding receptions

Side note: I was surprised to find out that Martha Stewart once plugged fortune cookies as a great wedding event item. Seems that had a big impact on the fortune cookie industry...

By focusing on the very specific behaviors, you can make sure that you are ready for the next step.

Okay... Can I Start Looking Now?

No. There are a couple things to do yet.

You still have to determine the kinds of sites where those people congregate online.

Question: Which of those markets is easier to target? Computer games or fortune cookies?

Asked that way, it might seem like kind of a tough question. Let's rephrase it in a more specific format, keeping the defined result in mind.

If you wanted to arrange a reciprocal linking deal, work a referral system, or find affiliates for a program who didn't already have a product in competition with you, which would be easier to do the deal for?

Yup. Fortune cookies!

If you wanted reviews, download links, or articles, it would be the games.

Notice that, for the direct money deals, the fortune cookies would be the preferred product. This is something like niche marketing in reverse. The more specialized the product, the easier it is to find its natural market. And the more perfectly suited this approach is to doing it.

Of course, if you narrow the games definition to "Educational games for children between 6 and 10 years of age," you get a whole different result.

Your target market is parents who research ideas and buy products to help their children get a head start. They actively take responsibility for their children's education. That's a whole lot easier to define a set of sites for than the generic "computer games."

A separate issue: Don't go with the stereotypes. How well do you think Mike's fortune cookies would do with traditional Chinese restaurants? Or children's games in a magazine that caters to joystick jockeys?

Be as specific as possible with your first approaches. You can get into inventive expansions of your market after you've had some experience with this.

Before you go out and actively start your search for sites that meet the main criteria (they have a ready audience that is composed largely of your target market), you need to do one more thing.

You have to outline what you're going to offer them to make the deal worth doing.

Here you have to ask a few questions.

- ? What's your profit margin?
- ? What's your repeat business/back end like?
- ? What's the lifetime value of your typical customer?
- ? What's your current cost to acquire a customer?
- ? What sort of creative incentives are you able and willing to offer to make the deal work? What else can you bring to the table besides cash payments?

Define what you want to pay, what you're willing to pay, and what else you can throw in to sweeten the pot. Things like referrals, traffic, tech support, special discounts, free samples - anything at all that might make the deal more attractive.

Now you're ready to start looking.

We interrupt this article for a special note:

You're only ready assuming you have the necessary infrastructure in place to fulfill the deal. If you're going to offer commissions, you need to have tracking and payment systems set up, and a tested sales process developed, before you contact anyone.

Not all goals require this, so we made it an aside.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled article, already in progress...

Ready... Set... Search!

Okay. So, where do you find the right sites?

First, go to [Google](#) or [Yahoo!](#) and dig down in their listings to find the groups of sites that fit your criteria. Start surfing.

At each site, ask yourself a few questions:

- ? Is this the kind of site I want to be associated with?
- ? Do they serve my target market?
- ? What kinds of deals do they already offer? Is mine compatible?
- ? How serious does this person or company seem?
- ? What about my offer, besides the cash, would benefit this business? Does it fill a hole in their product line? Will it help them fill unused ad space? Does the product complement an existing product or service? Does it solve a problem that's prevalent in this market? What else can I offer that looks like it would appeal to this firm?

If they have a logo that shows a link to a tracking service (the most common looks like a small blue planet with an orbit line around it), click on that and see what kind of traffic they get, and where it comes from. You'll be surprised at how many sites leave that info available to J. Random Visitor.

If they offer affiliate deals, look at the program they offer and see what kind of commissions they get for those sales. That's a good indicator of what they expect from a program.

What do they appear to be after with the site? Sales? Contacts? Subscribers? Creating confusion and driving their visitors to other sites?

How can you help them achieve their goals?

What about their site makes you think they'd benefit from your offer? Again, be specific. This part is important.

Take notes during this process.

And don't be afraid to say "This isn't the right site for this offer." Save your time for the folks who will appreciate it and who fit your program.

BTW, those little tracker buttons are doorways into whole realms of potential partners for you. There's a connection between the site you found and the ones that send visitors top them. Keep those links in mind for a close look after you're done with the current site.

Eureka! ... ummm ... Now What?

Okay. Let's assume that you've found a site that you think would be a good match, based on what they already do. What next?

Look around the site for contact info. You are looking for a phone number.

That's right, you're going to pick up the phone and talk to a human being.

"WHAT??? Why can't I just email them???"

Because everyone and their brother is doing that. There are even programs to do it automatically. It all starts to look like spam after a while.

If you want results, make the effort. And make sure you call during normal business hours in their time zone.

Note: If they have a phone number anywhere but the customer service pages, they probably won't object to a call. If the number says Customer Service or Sales before it, don't use it for a solicitation, even a partnership offer. And if they have one that's NOT a toll free line, use that in preference to their toll free number. People shouldn't have to pay to get solicitations.

Yes, it IS a solicitation. Get used to calling it that. It will keep you alert to the person's real state of mind while you're talking to them.

Call while you have their site open in your browser, if the time zone match works. Get the person on the phone who handles this type of thing, and ask them if it's a good time for the call. If not, ask when would be a better time, and call them back.

Be prepared to present the basics of your offer, and follow up, either at that time or later via email or further phone calls, at **their** convenience. Making it easy for them to say yes, and even easier to do the deal, is an absolute key to this process.

If they say they're not interested, move on, after politely closing the call. Do NOT email these people or otherwise contact them again once they tell you they're not interested or they fail to return a contact.

You're looking for people who'll work with you, not the ones who put up a banner in an obscure place just to shut you up. And you're the one calling them, so the obligation of courtesy is clear.

Be professional.

Hey. That Wasn't So Bad!

Don't rush into the next one. Once you've done your first "First Contact," stop.

What worked? What didn't? What questions did they ask? What got their attention, and what did they blow off like you hadn't said it? What concerns did they raise? What could you have done better? How will you tailor the next contact to improve on this one?

Take notes. Think. Reflect.

Do NOT let yourself get into a rush. And don't even consider writing a "sales pitch" at this point. That's the road to disaster.

After each call, do the same things. It will take less time after each call. You should be typing in answers to the most commonly asked questions, and adjusting the offer to make your responses better as you go along.

As you work on this, you'll be developing a good network of contacts. Surprisingly, many of the people who say no will be open to future offers if you handle yourself in a polite and professional manner.

They'll let you know either way, believe me.

If They Didn't List A Phone Number

What if there's no phone number listed?

First, do NOT look up a phone number in their domain info and call it if they don't have one on the site. There's a reason they left it off, and that's not what that info is for.

This is when you look for a contact email address. Again, not customer service or sales. Don't screw up by wasting someone's time who isn't in a position to answer your questions.

Assuming you find an appropriate address, start your email. Make it brief, and to the point. Tell them what about their site **specifically** gives you the impression that they might be interested in your offer. Be specific enough that they KNOW that you are actually typing the email to them, and not sending some bulk nonsense based on a robot's searches.

As an example of how NOT to do it, a spam just came in that works nicely. (The timing of these things is uncanny.) The opening paragraph was:

I recently visited your site and believe you may be interested in forming a strategic partnership. Our company owns and operates fully licensed online casinos. We have over 30,000 clients and 8,500 partner websites. The online gaming industry is the most explosive on the net, with over \$10 billion projected by 2002. We would like to offer you the following proposal:

This person is not only a spammer, she's a liar. And not very bright, it seems.

First, there is nothing on any of my sites that indicates that I'd be even remotely interested in gambling. She's putting herself in a position to get sued for spamming, unless she's got some magical software that can tell her the end destination of every email address she spams. All to avoid a little work.

Smart marketers don't mind work when it's profitable.

How do I know she's a liar? Had she visited the site, the email would have been sent to an address that was recognizably mine. This was BCC'd. And I got the same spam

to an address that is not affiliated with any web site at all, except as a contact address in the domain registration.

Not only that, the entire email included details about them, with no attempt to focus on whether the offer was appropriate for my visitors.

DOH!

Okay, you may or may not think spam is that big a deal, but the majority of people do. Do you really want to irritate 85% or more of your prospective partners by even LQQKING like you're spamming them?

So - be specific about their site. That solves the problem immediately. And since you're talking about their site, you're going to have a much better chance of getting their attention in a positive fashion.

So, How Do You Do It Right?

Let's use Mike as an example again, but let's say I'm contacting him. Here's a possible email I might send:

Mike,

I went to check out your site to see if it made sense to ask if we could work out a potential partnership deal, and one thing there really got me thinking... How did you ever manage to get your fortune cookies on Oprah??

Anyway, from the types of clients you list, I can see a definite overlap in our customers. I do catering for weddings in Indianapolis (we're actually right around the corner from your offices, on State St.) and wondered if you'd be interested in doing some referral trading?

I'd be happy to provide plenty of references. If you're interested, you can reach me at (317)555-1212 any time, or email me at paul@example.com

Thanks, and I look forward to hearing the Oprah story. I'd love to know how you pulled off a coup like that.

Paul Myers

Central Indiana Wedding Caterers
1313 State St
Indianapolis
(317)555-1212

Note that I started off by calling him "Mike," instead of "Mr Fry." If you look at Mike's site, you'll see why. A more formal site (one not run by an ex Ringling Brothers clown) might call for the more formal salutation.

I immediately pointed out something so specific that there could be no doubt that I'd looked at the site, while letting him know why I was contacting him. No way to confuse that note with a spam.

I covered the reason I thought it was a good match, and what kind of deal I was looking for, in one short paragraph. I then offered references (important for this kind of situation) and a local phone number and email address for him to reach me.

I then ended with a personal comment that was, again, about HIM. Not me or my product.

Notice the complete lack of hype, the immediate answer to "What's in it for me?," and the personal tone.

This will work. Think about it.

If you got that email, how would you respond?

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On Mike's site there's a toll phone number, a toll-free line specifically designated for ordering, an email address, and a street address.

You would obviously have called him, using the local number, rather than calling the toll-free line or emailing him. If the numbers were missing, that email is how you'd make the first contact.

The details of the offer should be conspicuous by their absence. You don't want to include them in the first email, unless there's a compelling reason to that's demonstrated on the site. This will be fairly uncommon.

You want to be able to answer any questions and present your offer credibly when someone responds. Immediately, and without fumbling too much.

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You'll be tempted to prepare "boilerplate" (canned text) for use in these emails. Don't do it. That will cause you to get lazy, and to start looking like you've just scraped addresses. A fresh, one-to-one email, written with the actual site owner as a human being in mind, will do so much more that you'd be cheating yourself trying to take shortcuts.

Patience is a virtue. Like I always say, if you've gotta have a virtue, patience is a good one.

If they don't respond to your email, don't email them again. Just don't.

If you absolutely MUST follow up, (which is probably a waste of time) send them a note via postal mail.

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As you go through these processes, keep lots of notes. Every time you contact someone, record the results, keep the original email you sent them, and evaluate their questions and responses. Always be aware of what you can do to improve your results.

Test, track, repeat. (Don't you get tired of hearing me say that?)

So, How Safe Is This?

Is there a guarantee that you'll never be accused of spamming if you use this approach?

Nope. The odds are so slim it's ridiculous, but it could happen. There are people out there who think any uninvited email at all is spam. (I've actually been accused of spamming by replying to an especially stupid spam, just because the sender didn't like my reply.)

These people are called "nuts."

Pay no attention to them. In virtually all cases, that's what your ISP will do. If your ISP takes a one-sender to one-recipient email like that as a problem, that's a sure sign that you need to get a new ISP.

However, don't think you can get away with collecting data and mail merging it into a form letter. You're not talented enough to build that good a form letter. No one is. Not with the tools available today. And even if the tools existed, there'd be no point in using them that way.

Get used to it. Anti-spam folks talk to each other, and businesspeople discuss deals they're offered. And a lot of people fall into both camps.

Try to fool them even in small things, and you lose.

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This is a simple process, but as you can see, it takes work. That's the downside. For most of us, it's a small price to pay.

The upside is that these contacts are people with whom you'll develop personal and professional relationships that will maintain real value for both parties for years.

The real power of this approach is in the additive nature of the relationships. If you find just 10 partner sites each month, you'll have those working with you while you build your network. And that expanding network allows you to add more value for your partners as well as for yourself.

Everyone wins.

Looking long term, isn't that worth the small effort to get it started?

Paul Myers

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