Business e-mail:
access anytime, anywhere

If you're beetling along nicely with a free e-mail address, think again. You're definitely saving pennies, but you might be losing pounds. Business-quality e-mail is helping smart companies to shine out from the competition and boost sales.

As the recession bites, many budding entrepreneurs are taking the plunge and starting to work for themselves. Whether your business is shiny and new or comfortably established, the way you are perceived depends on much more than just your logo.

After all, most businesses are not unique. Everyone from builders to management consultants faces competition. The way we present our businesses – our brand – influences our customers, the choices they make, and the money they spend.

In these credit crunch times, the extra edge brand can provide is growing, as companies fight for customer attention and loyalty. According to joint research by leading management consultants Booz Allen Hamilton and Wolff Olins, 'brand' was nominated twice as frequently as it was five years ago for contributing to corporate success, with 90% of the companies surveyed citing it as a key factor in their corporate success. In the same study, 80% of those companies with a strong focus on their brands reported operating profits almost twice as high as their industry sector's average.

That research was conducted among big corporate giants, but its advice works for everyone. For today's small businesses, a glowing brand drives new interest. It matters just as much as great products, robust cost-control and an effective sales process.

That's why it comes as a big surprise to find that many UK businesses give themselves a needless handicap by ignoring the value of business-class e-mail.

What's wrong with free e-mail?

"When you start up in business, you are going to be concentrating on getting it off the ground and not too worried about your 'corporate identity'", acknowledges Ian Dunston, Founder and MD of Exeter-based Cobalt Computer Systems. "Many people start by just using free e-mails like Hotmail or whatever comes from their Internet Services Provider (ISP)."

And that's fine – so long as you have no plans to become a bigger company, he points out. "If you're only ever going to be the sole trader who cleans windows for the same three streets or the small builder who will never need to grow the client base, this sort of e-mail address isn't going to be a problem."

But what happens if your business takes off? What if you need to hire more staff, or start competing with bigger and more established players who have better name recognition than you? Dunston says companies which stick to free e-mail for too long run the risk of two barriers to success:

- Your company will look insubstantial and unprofessional
- You'll be missing out on bags of effective communication techniques only available to organisations which make the simple step to business-class e-mail.

Similarly, even one-man-bands who develop a brand can look like million-dollar businesses; and tend to grow faster and more profitably.

Having your own domain name in your e-mails links elegantly with the rest of your brand, from the name on the side of your van to the logo at the top of your invoices. Whereas, if your customer keeps getting e-mails from you which look like they have been sent from an Internet Café, a little bit of the magic is rather lost. "It's just a fact that in the B2B (business-to-business) world, people expect more than that," warns Dunston. "Having your own domain is just so much more memorable, too."

What's a domain name?

A domain name is the second part of an internet address; the part which identifies your company; for example:

@smithbuilders.co.uk

It's far more professional than a free e-mail service (e.g. @hotmail.com), and you can use your domain name for your Web site, too.

Tackling the technology of free e-mail

As a small business owner, you could argue that all this is just a matter of taste. After all, if you're happy to quote rock-bottom prices, you might think that your image doesn't matter too much.

There are, however, also major functional limitations to free e-mail services – whether that be Hotmail or the e-mail addresses which come with your internet access (ISP) account, beyond the image problem.

For starters, free online e-mail services are stuck online. Online e-mail isn't automatically downloaded to your computer; so you won't be able to work on e-mails unless you're connected (and you won't have a local, searchable, record of your e-mail conversations, either). When a customer calls up, do you really want to have to say 'Hang on a moment while I just dial into my e-mail to get the details again?'

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ISP e-mail addresses generally get over this hurdle – by downloading messages to your computer (usually using a system called 'POP3'). However, most ISPs will default to deleting e-mails off their servers once they have been downloaded – unless you specifically ask for them to be kept. Many also don't offer Web-based access to those e-mails either. These two facts mean that downloaded e-mails stay downloaded: stuck on your office computer. If you then want to pick them up at home or in an internet café, you're scuppered.

So: to recap, free e-mail gets you anywhere access but only when you're online, and ISP e-mails usually give you all your e-mail all the time in the office, but not really anywhere else. There are ways around both problems, but it depends on your service provider and usually requires some technical wizardry to be deployed on every machine used by every employee – and that is a pretty good definition of 'overcomplicating things'.

Besides, as some clever people worked out in the 1990s, what's the point of anywhere access to your e-mail, if it looks different every time? James McCarthy, Business Manager in Microsoft UK's Mobile Communications division, paints the picture: "Suppose you pick up your e-mail on the road – on your mobile phone. You delete a few e-mails, reply to a couple, and skim the rest. When you get back to your office PC, sure it's downloaded your e-mails too, but it doesn't know that you've already read, deleted or replied to them. You're presented with a pristine list of all the stuff you've already dealt with."

This was the inspiration for 'IMAP', the alternative to POP3 which not only stores e-mails centrally but also their status and sent responses. You can log into your e-mail from any machine, and it will replicate the status of your centralised e-mail account locally. That means you can switch on a laptop at home, and have exactly the same presentation of your e-mails as you saw before you left work. It's what McCarthy calls "one single version of the truth"; and IMAP is widely respected as the smartest way to organise your e-mail.

Your own domain name and IMAP access-anywhere e-mail is the first step to enterprise-grade e-mail. Step 2 is to use software which makes the most of all your communications options.

E-mail software; for when e-mail is just the start...

Step forward Outlook, Microsoft's desktop e-mail software package. If you already use Microsoft Office software (Word and Excel, for example), you may even already have Outlook on your desktop. The current version of Outlook is fully compatible with your ISP's e-mail systems – i.e. you can still choose to receive all your current e-mails via hotmail, for example. into the program, but it also includes lots of useful features which you just won't find on most free e-mail services – here are just a few:

• Powerful search: never lose an e-mail again – find anything in seconds just by typing who it was from or a word from the e-mail's content

• Unlimited folders: organise e-mails into groups like 'New Sales Leads' or 'Suppliers' so you'll always know where to find things

• Flag e-mails for attention, and have them automatically appear in a to-do list

• ...and the optional extra of Outlook Business Contact Manager, which turns your Outlook e-mail into a powerful sales management tool; plotting your potential forecasted income, prompting you to take action on clients and ensuring that all your sales leads get a personal service. There are also a host of free add-ons to Outlook such as Office Accounting Express; which enables you to automate your invoicing and plot you balance sheet.

Another factor to consider is that as we all become more familiar with technology and the Web, online communication has become a collection of many more services than just e-mail. Smart businesses are using different tools for different jobs, for example:

• Getting hold of a supplier or colleague instantly with Instant Messenger (IM)

• Having voicemails and other communications sent to your e-mail account, to keep them in one place

• Making snappy announcements to whole groups of people by text message or the current hot new service, Twitter.

All of these belong to the modern set of interfaces between you, your customers, your suppliers and untapped markets. All of these can also be integrated either automatically or with freely available software gadgets straight into Outlook. If you're struggling along with free e-mail, you're probably missing out on an awful lot of extra information and opportunity.

The Truly Portable Business

Your third step to business grade e-mail is to make your e-mail service scale up to as many employees, locations and devices as necessary – you should be able to sleep easy, safe in the knowledge that your communications are available anywhere and anytime. "We are all using our mobile phones, working on laptops, and accessing e-mail and information on the move more and more," says McCarthy. "The way you communicate with your customers has to keep up with the competition".

No entrepreneur should be hampered by being out of touch. No business owner should be limited by where and when essential e-mail, voicemails or online applications can be accessed. If you don't know that an opportunity has come in, or a delivery isn't working out, you won't be able to do anything about it.

Exchange is Microsoft's e-mail administration software – it lives on a server and distributes e-mails to everyone in your organisation. It's generally installed when a company reaches five or more employees, but is now available as a hosted solution (i.e. rented by the month from a third party provider) which means it's becoming economical for ever smaller companies.

Exchange is robust, scalable, secure and designed to ensure you can pick up your e-mail not just on your PC, but also on your smartphone or through a Web browser. On the road in Woking or in an internet café in Inverness, you and your staff will be able to enjoy seamless access to the same e-mail and communication services as though you were at your own desk. Exchange will also deal with spam messages, and keep out unwanted snoopers.

As Exchange is server-based, it is also designed to bring your team together – and that means it's not just your e-mails that can be interlinked. You can also now see your colleagues' calendars, meaning it's much easier to track where everyone is. Say a customer rings up and wants to book a vital meeting with one of your team. Instead of taking a message because he's out of the office, you can zip in to his appointments book, find a free time and book the client in there and then. Business no longer has to come to a standstill just because one person is on holiday.

The message, says McCarthy, really has to be that in the current climate all companies, regardless of size, need to be as efficient, productive and responsive as possible. "If you aren't doing this, you can be sure that the company down the road is – and so you run the risk of being less reactive to opportunities as you'd like," he cautions.

Solving the information overload

Some small business owners might argue that this technology is all very well, but nothing beats the personal touch: a good ten minute phone must surely be better than a bunch of e-mails? Perhaps surprisingly, the IT specialists entirely agree: "Face to face and direct dial are fantastically effective forms of communication - of course they are," says McCarthy. "But there is a time and a place for all forms of business communication. This is a way for you to control your information flow so you can prioritise what work needs to be done."

"I turned off the voicemail on my mobile five years ago," says Cobalt's Dunston. "If you need to talk to me and I need to talk to you, thanks to the plethora of technologies and an ability to keep them organised, I can be there straight away to process your needs most effectively."

Get the wow factor for yourself

The family of integrated Business E-mail technologies like Microsoft Office Outlook, Outlook Mobile (a version of Outlook that runs on your phone) and Web Access and Office Communicator help you get your business ready for growth thanks to two pay-offs: a clear brand plus the efficiencies of e-mail and other communications tools that are consistent and always available.

"If you have a Microsoft infrastructure in place, business e-mail and all it offers are there on tap – truly state of the art communications for highly attractive prices," concludes McCarthy. And Dunston adds, "When we move clients from free e-mail POP3 on to this, well, the wow factor is always immense. Clients tell us that it truly eclipses how they were running their businesses before."

Ian Dunston, MD of Microsoft Certified Partner Cobalt Computer Systems, gives us the top five ways his clients are benefiting from business e-mail:

- **Branding:** "It's fine to have one e-mail account if you are on your own and don't intend to grow. But having a brand is part of what makes business exciting for many people. A consistent online identity from e-mail through to the Web site is great for even our smallest customer. We are working with plenty of companies to turn word of mouth awareness into much bigger visibility – and they win larger orders as a result."

- **Integration:** "Joining up all your business e-mails at the same time as you move to other integrated systems (financial management software, for example) makes a lot of sense. It just makes it so much easier to see where you stand as a business, both in terms of the core figures and also the image you're presenting to the outside world."

- **Flexibility:** "As we start to get more of what's called Cloud Computing, where we as businesses use more and more software over the Web; the ability to host core applications like e-mail securely will make mobile computing accessible even for the smallest sole trader."

- **Professionalism:** "We had a client earlier this year who had three separate e-mail accounts with staff replying to the same people with different pieces of information. It looks horribly unprofessional and it nearly cost them two big sales as a result. Your reputation is easy to lose if you're not careful about things like that, and business-quality e-mail is a great guardian of your business integrity."

- **Efficiency:** "One recent customer says life's never been the same since we hooked up his [smart] phone to his Exchange Server. Now he can sit on the train and work just like he was back at his desk. We see hundreds of similar cases, where clients make their days much more productive with technology."

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