

HostGator

GUIDE TO
LAUNCHING
YOUR HOME BUSINESS



A home business to call your own sounds ideal to a lot of people, especially those who'd like to stop commuting, generate side income, spend more time with their families, or have more control over how they work. It's possible to start a viable and eventually thriving business from your home (Steve Jobs and Mary Kay Ash did), but it's also possible to start a business that never gets off the ground. Some part of success is always luck, but the big difference between successful and failed home-based businesses is how serious you are about getting it right.

Ideally, you'll read how-to books, pour over blogs, ask questions and get answers in professional forums, join mastermind groups, and seek the advice of mentors.

But many people get bogged down in that process, or worse, never start, paralyzed by FOMO and worried that they can't move forward without knowing absolutely everything. A big part of entrepreneurship is trying, failing, and getting back up again. Those who made it will tell you it was all worth it.

That's why we've created this ebook. Consider it your fast track to successful entrepreneurship. We've done the research for you and rounded up all the best recommendations from entrepreneurs. Use this as your guide to avoiding pitfalls, a checklist to see how prepared you are, and a resource for digging deeper into the areas you need to know more about.

Let's launch your home business.

- 1. Interview yourself.**
- 2. Set up your home business workspace.**
- 3. Make a simple and clear business plan.**
- 4. Put your legal and financial ducks in a row.**
- 5. Set up your web site.**
- 6. Gather your marketing magic kit.**
- 7. Listen to your prospective customers.**
- 8. Develop your MVP.**
- 9. Ramp up your marketing.**
- 10. Expand your product line.**
- 11. Review regularly.**



STEP ONE: INTERVIEW YOURSELF.



Because you'll be both the boss and the employee of your new business, it's important to make sure you're ready to fill those roles before you commit your time, money, and effort to your new venture.

One way to check? "Interview" yourself before you begin.

These questions focus on the traits and habits successful small business owners need. The good news is you probably have several of them. The better news is you can train yourself to handle the rest. So, put on your best home-based business interview outfit (yes, sweats are okay) and ask yourself the following...

Do you enjoy learning new things?

When you start a business, not only do you have to learn many new things, but you'll also learn how much you don't yet know. If you're enthusiastic about learning, you're more likely to succeed.

How persistent are you?

Reaching your business goals takes time, and no two timelines are the same. Can you stick with your business through learning experiences, setbacks, and the time it takes to build a sustainable customer base?

How well do you learn from your experiences?

The flip side of persistence is the ability to change course when you learn a better way to do things.



What's your history with handling responsibility?

You know those people you can always count on to step up when something needs to be done? They make really good home-based business owners because they're in the habit of identifying what needs to be done and then doing it.

Helpful Tool

Stay on top of your to-do list with **Zen to Done** or **Pomodoro**.

Do you have a healthy attitude toward money?

To have a functioning, profitable business—and to pay your bills and eat—you must be willing to charge the right rates.

Are you comfortable making important decisions?

You're going to make mistakes with your business, because everyone does. Accept that and make decisions anyway, preferably with some input from mentors, peers, and customers.

Do you plan carefully before investing time and effort in a new project?

There are business ideas that get you so fired up you can't wait to start, and then there are business ideas that get you fired up enough to validate them through market research before starting. If you plan and do your research, you're more likely to refine your ideas into winners.

Do you enjoy connecting with people?

Working from home doesn't mean you can dodge all human contact. Making connections is crucial to success, especially if you work alone. Your colleagues, clients, customers, and mentors are the network your business needs to survive and grow.



How well do you handle unstructured time?

Yes, being your own boss means you can set your own schedule, but you still have to set the schedule and follow it. For most people, this takes some practice and adjustments, but it's a skill you can learn.

Role Models

Study time management tips from experts like Laura Vanderkam and Carson Tate.

Are you willing to seek and listen to feedback?

Listen with an open mind and you'll find ways to improve your business. Take feedback personally or reflexively insist that it's wrong and you won't learn anything.

Is your main business goal to deliver value to your customers?

Whatever other goals you have for your home-based business—flexible hours, more income, freedom from meetings—the main goal must be providing your customers with something of value. Your business can't exist without a base of customers who buy from you over and over again and who happily tell other people to buy from you.

Did you ace the interview?

Next, we'll look at the logistics of running a business at home, from setting up a productive workspace to making a professional impression on clients, and even getting your pets to be quiet when you're on a call.





STEP TWO: SET UP YOUR HOME BUSINESS WORKSPACE

It's time to talk about getting your home ready for your new business.

1. Make room to work at home

At the very least, you'll need the following:

- a place to use your computer for website updates, marketing, billing, and other tasks.
- a door you can close so family and pets know when you're working.
- a space to make your products, if applicable.

If you can set aside a room in your home just for work, you may be able to deduct some household expenses on your federal income taxes. (Ask your CPA!)

2. Find storage space for your small business

If you sell physical goods, you'll need room to store them, space to package them for shipping, and room for shipping supplies and a postage scale.

If you plan to see clients at home, you'll need a professional looking space to host them, ideally a separate entrance or detached office in a converted shed or garage. You'll also want to make sure visiting clients have a convenient place to park.

3. Plan your mini-infrastructure

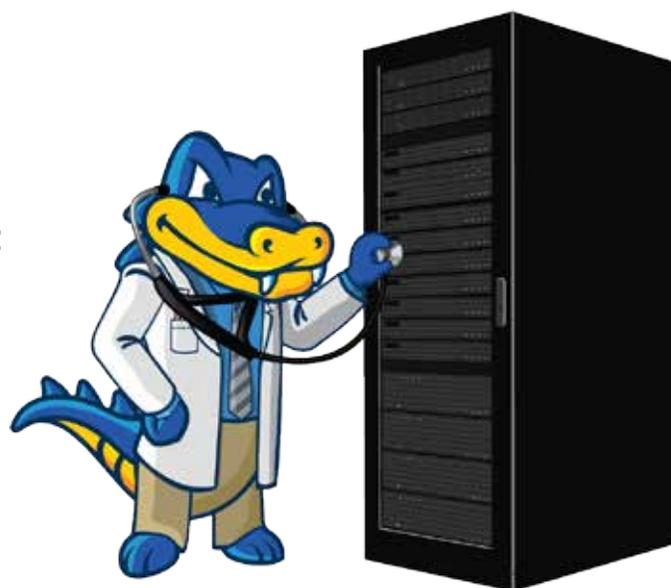
There's nothing like the freedom of working for yourself—until there's a tech problem and no one from IT comes to fix it for you. For internet access issues, it's very important that you have reliable service and a reliable backup plan in case of an outage (such as a mobile hotspot).

It's also wise to think now about other places where you can work if there's a utility outage, noisy construction, or another major interruption at home, such as:

- your local library
- coffee shops
- rent-by-the-day co-working spaces
- work-at-home friends' houses

Avoid Using Your Garage!

As tempting as it may be to use your garage for storage, proceed carefully. Bugs, dust, humidity, and temperature fluctuations can damage your stored items. If your water heater is in the garage and it leaks or bursts, anything stored on the floor will be water-damaged. If you must use the garage, keep your stored items in airtight containers and off the floor.



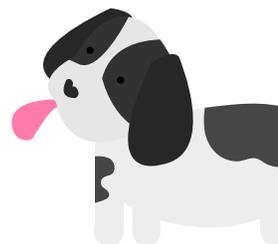
4. Find family support

Unless you live alone, you'll have to prevent and deal with interruptions from housemates or family members. Establish regular times when you're "not available" even if you're at home, or you may simply decide that when your workspace door is shut, you need to be left alone. This is very important if you have phone or video chats with your clients. Nothing casts doubt on your professionalism quite like seeing your housemate stroll by in pajamas or hearing kids arguing in the background.

If you're caring for children or parents, hire caregiving or babysitting help on a regular basis so you can concentrate fully on your work.

5. Plan for pet antics

"Let sleeping dogs lie" is great advice unless you're about to be on a call or in a meeting. Then you should wake them up, give them some special chew toys, and move them outside or to another room. Keyboard-perching cats, hollering parrots, and DSL-cable-gnawing bunnies need corralling while you work, too.



6. Figure out how much money you'll need to begin

You may be reading these tips while mentally tallying the cost of implementing them, which is smart. Starting a small business doesn't have to cost a lot, but it's not free. Here are some basics you may need funds for:

- computer equipment
- internet connections (main and backup)
- [web site hosting](#)
- office furniture
- packaging and shipping supplies
- raw materials or wholesale goods
- care for your kids, parents, and/or pets



Is your workplace all set?

Next, we'll go over making a simple but effective business plan.

STEP THREE: MAKE A SIMPLE AND CLEAR BUSINESS PLAN.

You might think you can skip this step, especially if your image of a business plan is a long, wordy document packed with financial graphs and data tables. For most new business owners, though, writing a business plan is less about recruiting investors and more about clarifying what your business will do, who your customers are, what it will cost to operate, and how much money you can reasonably expect to make.



A Basic Home Business Plan

At a minimum you'll need a plan that covers the basics, including:

- What you'll sell, who will buy it, and why they'll buy it
- How you'll price your products and get paid
- How you'll reach customers and win referrals
- How you plan to measure success
- The expected costs of your website, business license, materials and supplies

Additional Resources

Chris Guillebeau's One-Page Business Plan from The \$100 Startup
Small Business Administration



What Is Your Unique Selling Proposition (USP)?

Your business idea doesn't have to be brand-new, just different enough in a way that customers will value.

Example:

Let's say you're opening a kebab stand. Your USP could be one of the following:

- I'm the only kebab stand in town
- There's plenty of kebab stands, but mine is the only one that offers free drink refills
- I've got a prime location near a major office building so
- I'm the most convenient lunch option for hundreds of workers nearby

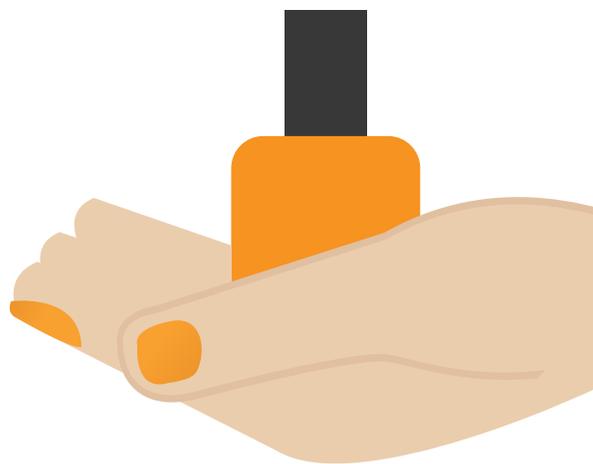
Whatever your USP is, it has to benefit your customers in some way.

Who Are Your Buyer Personas?

Before you know how to reach your customers and win referrals, you need to know who your ideal customers will be. In marketing terms, these ideal customers are called buyer personas. [Building one or more buyer personas](#) can help you focus your product offerings, your marketing, and even your physical location.

Example:

Let's say you plan to sell custom nail decals online. Your main customer is probably a woman under the age of 50 who enjoys beauty and fashion but doesn't have the time or money for a weekly salon manicure. Another persona may be teen girls who enjoy changing their look often. Next you can find out which social media platforms these personas use, [build connections with them](#) there, and skip posting on platforms where your personas don't hang out.



At a minimum, you should review and update your business plan every year.

Now that you have a plan for your business plan,

it's time to start setting up the accounts and paperwork you'll need to make your new business official.

STEP FOUR: GET YOUR LEGAL AND FINANCIAL DUCKS IN A ROW.

Things are about to get real. This is the stage when we go over the permits, licenses, tax documents, and other financial must-haves you need to set up your new business.

1. Choose your business structure

This sounds complicated but most of the time it's really easy. Sole proprietorship is the form most new businesses take, and it can be the best choice if you're the only one running your business, you're not selling something that costs a fortune to produce, and your business doesn't involve a lot of financial risk or liability exposure.

Other business structure options include: partnerships, limited liability companies, corporations, and cooperatives.

2. Get your business permit, tax permit, and any necessary licenses

Your city or county will require you to get a permit to operate your business, and your state may require a license, too. If your business will collect sales tax, you'll need a permit for this that you'll be required to display where you make sales (including at your vendor table if you sell at various events). Most states allow you to get your paperwork done online.



3. Get your IRS Employer Identification Number

Yes, you're an employer, even if you're a solopreneur and your only employee is yourself. You'll need an EIN to open your business bank account, and you can use your EIN instead of your Social Security Number on some forms (like W-9 forms for independent contractors) to safeguard your identity against hackers and loss. Apply for an EIN online at [IRS.gov](https://www.irs.gov).

4. Open a business bank account

At the very least, you'll need a business checking account with your local bank or credit union to avoid a tax-time nightmare of commingled personal and business funds. Consider getting the following, too:

- Accounting software
- Paper checks
- Debit card

5. Figure out your budget

You can set money aside in your business account for your startup costs and to cover ongoing expenses until your business is self-sustaining. Your expenses won't be the same each month, of course, so it's important to plan month by month to see when you can expect to earn and spend more (or less).

If you can afford to consult with a CPA at this point, he or she can give you tips on how to organize your record keeping, point out any expenses you may have overlooked, maximize your potential deductions, and stay on the right side of IRS rules.





6. Protect your business

It's a good idea to talk with the agent who handles your homeowners or renters insurance about your new business. Find out if your business equipment, inventory stored at home, and anything else related to your new gig is covered under your current policy, and if not, what your coverage options are. If you offer services (such as web design, bookkeeping, or writing) you may want to look into professional liability insurance.

7. Choose your contracts

Do some online research and talk to others in your field to learn what kind of client contract is standard in your industry. Find some templates and use them to customize a version for your business. (It's always a good idea to have your standard contract reviewed by a lawyer before you start using it, and to stick very closely to a lawyer-approved document.)

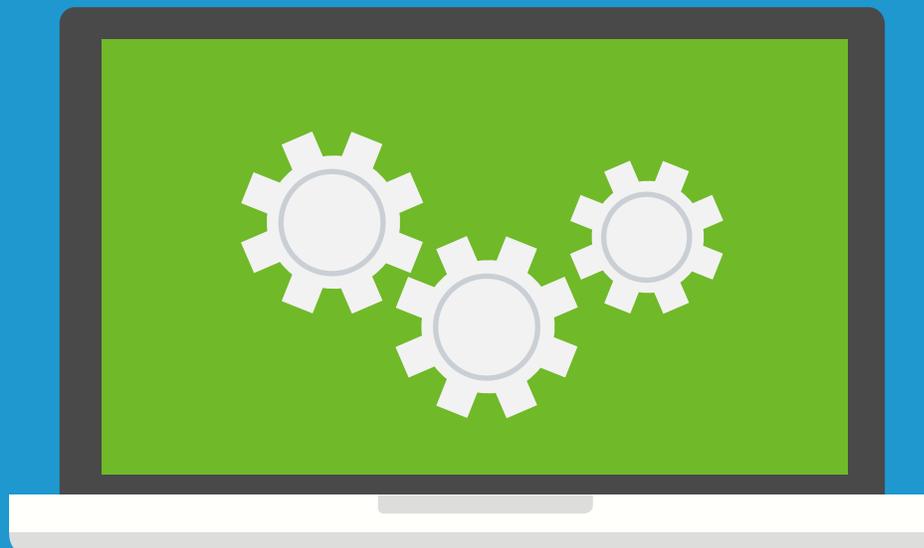
Now that your legal and financial ducks are lined up in marching order,

it's time to set up your business website.



STEP FIVE: SET UP YOUR WEBSITE

It only takes a few minutes to register your domain name and sign up for a web hosting plan. The real work is the planning, designing and testing that goes into making sure your new site works the way you want it to so you can start reaching customers with it. Let's dig in.



1. Choose your domain name

Not sure exactly what that a domain name is? It's the part of your URL visitors will use to go to your website. Here's the URL (the internet address, so to speak) for HostGator:

<https://www.hostgator.com/>

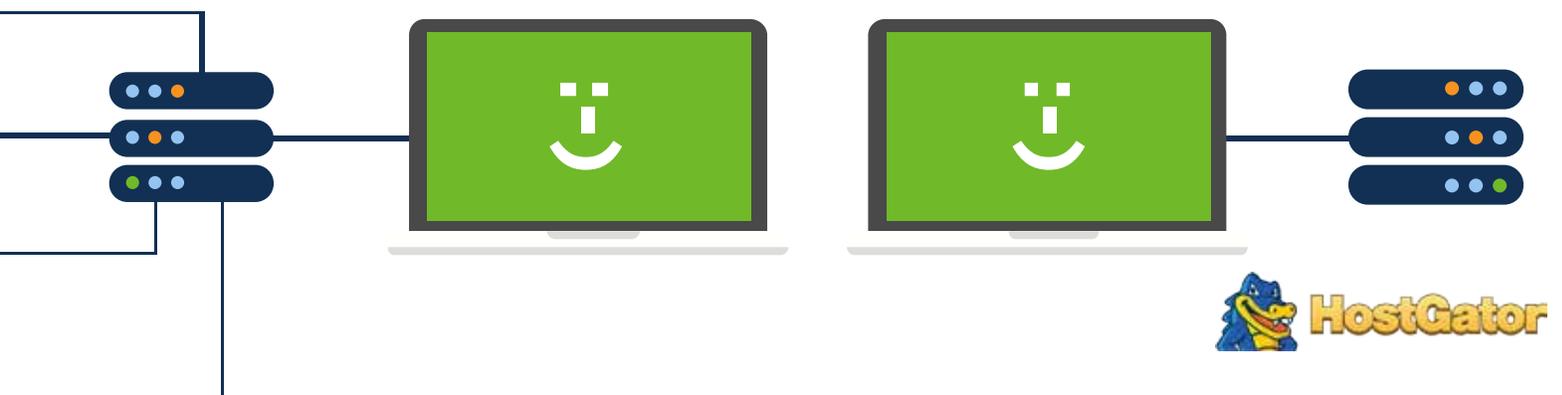
Within that URL, `hostgator.com` is the domain name. There are many domain suffixes (technically known as top-level domains or TLDs) that you can choose from besides `.com`, like `.net` and `.biz`, but `.com` is the most common.

Ideally, your domain name will be short, easy to remember, and not confusing when users type it in a navigation bar. More importantly, though, your domain name should be part of your company brand. Take your time to come up with as many ideas as you can, narrow the field a bit, and then check to see if those names are available.

If your domain is available, you can register it with HostGator. Once you've found a domain name that works, you may want to see if variations are available, too. If so, you might want to register them also and set them up to redirect visitors to your site at your primary URL.

HostGator can help!

Visit <https://www.hostgator.com/domains> to register your domain today.



2. Check your privacy settings

When you register your domain name or names, you'll have the option to buy inexpensive domain privacy protection that keeps your personal information off WHOIS. WHOIS is a directory run by ICANN, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, which anyone can use to look up the contact information you used to register your domains. Companies like HostGator that offer privacy shield services use their address in your domain name registration instead of your personal details.

3. Pick a hosting plan

Next, you need a place to store whatever you put on your site so visitors can see it. Creating, offering, and maintaining that data storage space is what web hosting companies like HostGator do. Don't get too overwhelmed by the monthly plan options you'll see. For almost all new home-based businesses, an inexpensive [shared business hosting plan](#) will have everything you need. Whatever host and plan you choose, you should consider:

- The number of domains you can register on a single plan
- Available bandwidth, which will affect how fast your site loads and how many people can view your site at one time
- Email account tools, which you'll use to create branded email addresses
- What templates or site-building tools the host provides and how easy they are to use
- What e-commerce tools the host supports, if you're planning to have an online shop on your site
- Downtime, which is how often and how long the web host's servers—and therefore your website—are typically unavailable
- Customer support availability and quality



4. Build your site

Once you register your domain and have a hosting plan, you're ready to set up your site.

Pick a site template or use a [website builder](#) tool to start creating your home page. You can set it up however you like. Just keep in mind that a good business website must have these elements:

- A responsive design, so your site will be easy to read and use on smartphones
- Your business name and a short, descriptive tagline in the page header
- A clear, brief explanation of what your business is and what you do
- A bit about you, your business, your accomplishments, and testimonials from customers
- Contact information (phone number and email address) on every page of your site
- A product list, shopping cart, and checkout if you're selling products online

These are the basics, of course. You can add photos, product videos, a blog, and other elements to your site over time.

HostGator can help!

[Free Website Builder included with all hosting plans.](#)





5. Test and update

Your site is live, but that's just the beginning. Ask family and friends to help you by checking it out and reporting any problems with page display, load times, and navigation. Schedule regular site-maintenance time to add features, make changes, and keep your template and plugins up to date. You may also want to subscribe to a [site backup service](#) to maintain the most recent version of your site and spare you the trouble of rebuilding your site if there's ever a problem during a template or plug-in upgrade.

HostGator can help!

Protect your website with a daily, automatic backup from [CodeGuard!](#)

Now you have a basic home business website that you're ready to promote.

Next we'll talk about the promotional tools you'll need to get started.



STEP SIX:

GATHER YOUR MARKETING MIX

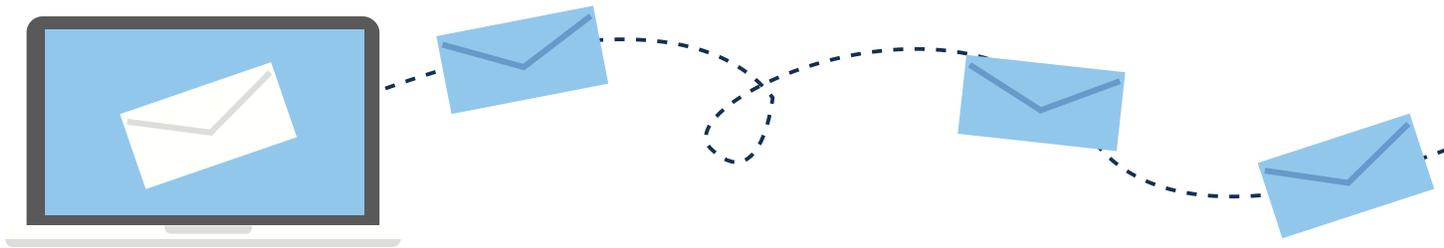
It only takes a few minutes to register your domain name and sign up for a web hosting plan. The real work is the planning, designing and testing that goes into making sure your new site works the way you want it to so you can start reaching customers with it. Let's dig in.

Email

Now that you have a domain name and website, you're ready to set up **your professional email address**. If you host your website with HostGator, it only takes a couple of minutes [in your control panel](#).

You need a professional email address, even if your personal email address is something related to your business. That's because customers find [professional email addresses](#) more trustworthy, and as a new business, that's exactly what you want to communicate. Use this address on your site, business cards, social media, and other marketing materials.

In your email settings, create a **signature line** for your professional emails that includes your name, your company name, your tagline, a link to your website, and maybe your phone number.



Phone

Don't want a separate phone for your business? Get a Google Voice or Skype number instead, and use that number for your business, or use the toll-free VoIP number that comes with HostGator's [business hosting plans](#). Then decide how you'll answer business calls. Record a good outgoing voicemail message and include an alternate way for customers to reach you, like your email address.

SEO

You also need **keyword-optimized title tags and content** on each page of your website to help search engines find your site. However, resist the urge to use the same keywords over and over in your site copy. The goal is to rank highly in search results and establish credibility. Copy that reads like a robot wrote it isn't credible.

Social Media

Now's the time to choose **the social media platforms** your business will use, based on the ones your customer personas use. Are your ideal customers pinning products like yours on Pinterest boards? Do they chat with their peers in Facebook groups? Are they sharing technical tips on their YouTube channels? Go where they are, and don't worry about the dozens of other platforms.

Business Cards

Some of your marketing will happen offline, which is why at least some printed marketing materials are a must, too. At the very least, you'll want business cards.

Why business cards in the age of the smartphone? When people are interested enough in your business to ask for your card, you have the opportunity to impress a potential customer or underwhelm them.

Choose to impress by (a) having business cards and (b) having cards that look good. Always carry your cards in a holder to protect them from pocket and purse damage.

Other Promo Items

Branded labels can add panache to product packaging and gift-wrapped items. A magnetic sign on your car can raise awareness around town and is a popular choice for small home-service businesses. Bear in mind that when the magnet is on display, your vehicle is a rolling brand ambassador. Drivers will notice your cool magnet. They'll also notice whether your car is clean, whether your tailpipe is sagging, and how you drive, so keep that in mind!

When you have your marketing toolbox fully stocked, you're ready to move on to the most important step: connecting with and listening to target customers.

STEP SEVEN: LISTEN TO YOUR PROSPECTIVE CUSTOMERS

This step is all about the fine art of listening to your prospective customers. Listening is a tried-and-true technique for success, because customers will tell you what they want and how they want it.

What are you listening for?

The first thing to listen for is demand.

Example:

Let's say you're a baker and you know that gluten-free products are popular and sell for more than traditional baked goods. Before you roll out (yeah, we went there!) a gluten-free product line, listen to gluten-free shoppers in your area. Do they want sandwich loaves a couple of times a week, or are they more interested in the occasional birthday cake? Is there enough demand to sustain your business locally?



Next, listen for what potential customers are willing to pay.

If they're not talking about it, you can ask. You may find that prospective buyers aren't willing to pay a sustainable price for your offerings, or you may find that your planned prices are too low and you can raise them to grow your business without losing customers.

Listen to your ideal customers

Listen to people who match your [customer personas](#) when you're making business decisions. Your friends and relatives may be supportive but unless they're in your target market, their input may not be helpful. Many a small business owner has underpriced their services more than once because they listened to their peers—often other cash-strapped new business owners—instead of their target market of high-income households or medium to large businesses.

Where to listen to your customers



If you already know people in your target market, ask if you can pick their brains. If not, look to the social networks you identified in Step 6.

Are there blogs your ideal customers follow? You can follow them, too, and pay attention to the comments. Join in if you have questions or ideas to bounce off commenters, but avoid thread hijacking and self-promotion. Remember that social media is more than just Facebook and Twitter. Your target customers may be following makeup-tutorial channels on YouTube or joining computer-industry discussion groups on LinkedIn.

How to really listen to your customers

To get the most value from listening to your customers, get familiar with active listening and start learning to spot and avoid confirmation bias.

Confirmation bias is how psychologists describe the human tendency to place more value on information that supports our assumptions and give less credit to information that contradicts them. Confirmation bias can prevent you from really hearing your customers and can lead to bad decision-making in other areas of your business, too. All of us have this quirk, and even business titans like Warren Buffett have to work against it by consciously seeking out, and really listening to, viewpoints and opinions that don't match theirs.

What does it look like when this bias plays out? Here's an example.

A retreat organizer loves everything about his venue—the food, the décor, the setting—because it reminds him of where his family took vacations when he was a kid. When retreat clients give positive feedback, it confirms his feelings for the place. When guests bring up problems, he's likely to dismiss their complaints as minor or baseless because he's biased toward seeing the retreat location in a very positive light. Both types of customer feedback could help him improve his business, but he's only really listening to the positives.

Knowing that confirmation bias exists can help you combat it and make better decisions.

Another bias-buster is active listening. It's used by everyone from couples' counselors to customer service trainers, and you can use it, too. These are the steps:

- Listen to your customers without interrupting and without forming a response in your head while they're talking (or while you're reading their email).
- Respond by outlining what you heard them say in neutral terms or in ways that reflect the customers' feelings. You don't have to agree or disagree right now.
- Listen to any additional feedback from the customers and make sure you understand what they're really saying. It's a good idea to thank them for their input, too.

Active listening takes some reactivity and bias out of the conversation so you can use your customers' input more effectively. It can also [help you build customer loyalty](#).

When should you listen to your ideal customers?

Always.

Remember, you can never have enough feedback.

What are we going to do with everything you learn from listening to your prospective customers?

The next step is to develop or refine your MVP.

That's the minimum viable product that you'll debut and then update over time, based on (you guessed it) listening to your customers.



STEP EIGHT: DEVELOP YOUR MVP

Now it's time to focus on the details of your first product. You've probably had a product or a whole line in mind all along and you may have some very specific ideas.

As we discussed in the previous step on **customer feedback**, what we think our customers want and what they actually want may not be the same thing. As you listen carefully to your target audience, you can develop a clearer idea of what they'll buy from you and what might be a misfire. To be sure, though, most business experts recommend starting small and simple, with something called a **MVP**, or **minimum viable product**.

Why a MINIMUM Viable Product?

"Minimum" may sound diminishing to you. After all, the reason you're starting your own business is to wow your customers and impress them with how well you meet their needs, right? Shouldn't you roll out your very best idea right out of the gate?



Not exactly, according to many successful small-business founders and serial entrepreneurs. Your very best idea may not be quite what your customers want, for whatever reason. If you've spent all your capital on this one product that doesn't quite get customers to buy, your business may run out of money before it recovers from the misstep. That's a big risk to take, especially if you're funding your new home-based business out of your own savings.

The 3-step MVP approach to product development

A more prudent plan is to start by offering a basic version of what you've heard your customers ask for and then...

1. **Ask** for lots of feedback from your first customers.
2. **Listen** to that feedback actively and with as little confirmation bias as you can manage.
3. **Roll out** a new version with improvements suggested by users and clients OR scrap the MVP if it flops and go back to listening to your customers for new ideas.

If this sounds like the product-version update process for every app and piece of tech hardware you use, it is. Launching with an MVP keeps your risk and expense low while letting you test the waters with your product and your target audience. You can use this process for each new product or service you offer.

In fact, you should follow the MVP path for each new product you introduce, because no matter how well you think you know your customers, you can misjudge their interest and end up wasting time and money.

Won't early customers be disappointed when you bring out a new version later?

Take care of your first customers by offering them a deal on your updated products later on. Software publishers do this when they roll out new versions. You get a discount on Microsoft Office, for example, if you're upgrading from an older version. It's good business (and a smart marketing strategy) to reward your existing customers by giving them a "preview sale" on your new version before you make it widely available. We're getting ahead of ourselves, though. Right now, the focus is on your first MVP.

The MVP review

Remember to base your first product on what your customers say they want and need. Ideally, you'll invest only enough time and money to meet your customer's requests without risking too much on your end. Ask for advice from mentors and peers to make your first product cost-effectively.

Then, see if your MVP sells. Listen to what your customers tell you about it: why they bought it or didn't, what they thought of it, what they like, and what they'd like to change. Keep those notes for future product updates and changes, and keep track of your first customers so you can reward them with deals later on in exchange for their feedback.

Next, we'll look in depth at the marketing methods you can use

to get the word out about your MVP,
drive traffic to your business web site,
and grow your customer base.



STEP NINE: RAMP UP YOUR MARKETING.

At this point, you've developed your first basic product, or you're working on it. You've put together your marketing toolbox, which includes social media accounts, your business website, a professional email address, and the results of your social media listening. Here's how to use them to establish your brand and connect your audience to your product.

Social media best practices for solopreneurs

When you put together your marketing toolkit, you found the social media platforms that your ideal customers use, set up business accounts on those platforms, and studied their tutorials for business users. Each platform is a bit different, but some practices work well across all of them:

Post regularly. You don't need a constant volley of posts, but regular posts keep your business visible and show that it's active and engaged. Abandoned social media accounts can undermine customer trust in your brand.

Share useful information. Your ideal customers need and want certain things, and you can earn their trust by posting information that helps them out. It doesn't have to be--and shouldn't always be--your own company's products or services. You can share other people's how-to articles, video tutorials, inspirational pins, and interviews. When you do share your own products and insights, focus on building trust and connections first, and making the sale may follow.



Promote wisely. Social media is great for announcing flash sales, sharing coupon codes, and other deals. Be sure your language is clear so there's no potential for customers to misunderstand your offer, and stick to your offer deadlines, even if no one bites the first couple of times. It's tempting to extend deadlines, but that trains your audience to ignore them, which can reduce responses to your offers.

Track your results. Some posts may get lots of shares and clicks, while others get few or none. Study what does well and steer more of your posts in that direction.

Invite followers to visit your site. An easy way is to promote a blog post or lively comments discussion. Don't have a blog yet? We're about to fix that.

Start your own blog



A blog is a necessary marketing tool, and it's easy to [start a blog](#) on your business website. Keeping your blog updated with fresh and relevant content that helps your business rank well in search results is a the real challenge, but you can do it. Here are the basics.

Make a list of topics your target audience talks about, especially problems your business can solve for them. Whatever it is they're talking about that relates to your business, you'll want to talk about it on your blog.

Build a content calendar. Just as you want to post social media updates regularly, do the same with your blog. A regular deadline will help you focus and keep your business fresh in the minds of readers.

Use the keywords your customers search for to find businesses like yours. Don't beat the copy to death with the same keywords over and over, but do include important phrases like, say, "bulk order temporary tattoos" or "healthy school lunch delivery" or whatever it is you're trying to [rank well for in search results](#).

Write simply. Write as if you're talking to a good friend or customer and you'll connect with your readers. If the act of writing ties you up in knots, dictate your posts to your phone or PC and then transcribe them.

Promote your blog posts on your social media accounts. Be sure to include images to increase click-through and read rates.

Track your results. Regularly review traffic stats for your posts, such as unique visitors, time on the page, where they're coming from, what search terms they used, and the number of comments per post.

Invite your blog readers to join your email list so they'll always know when you publish something new. That brings us to...

Email marketing for home business owners

Your email list is a valuable asset, because it's all the people who have bought from you, who are interested in what you have to say, or want to know what you will offer them next. In other words, these folks have already said yes to your business, to some degree. They may not buy everything you offer and they may not read every email you send, but they're open to hearing from you.



Email regularly. Don't bombard your list members, but [don't let them forget about you](#), either. Email newsletter experts say once a month is the minimum for keeping yourself in customers' minds.

Write great subject lines. Treat them like headlines and make them short enough to display in the preview window.

Say something useful. Share insights, promote products and offers, and answer FAQs. You can also promote specific blog posts or social media discussions that are going strong. Another popular option is to include a case study or testimonial from a satisfied customer.

Track your results. Free-to-low-cost tools like [Constant Contact](#) show you how well each campaign performs. See how many recipients opened your email and clicked on links within your email. Use what works in your next message and drop the things that don't work.

Influencer marketing for small business

With social media, a blog, and an email marketing program in place, you're ready to start courting influencers. You probably know from experience that people are more likely to buy from businesses that friends and family recommend. Influencer marketing is a similar way to generate word of mouth from experts and high-profile people in your field.

Businesses of any size can engage in influencer marketing, although you should calibrate your expectations to your business size and scope. When you do run an influencer campaign, track your results to see how well it worked and to get ideas for making your next influencer campaign even more effective.

Next, let's dive into developing new products based on feedback from your customers, how and when to market new lines to existing customers, and how to reach new customers as your product offerings grow.



STEP TEN: EXPAND YOUR PRODUCT LINE.

Now you have at least one viable product or service for sale. It's time to refine it and maybe expand your offerings so you can make more sales to your current customers and reach new customers, too.

Start (always) by listening to your customers

How do you know what to offer next? Listen and your customers will tell you. If they don't have any requests for you, you can ask--then use your active listening skills to hear their answers clearly. Start conversations with your customers about their needs when you see them face to face in your shop or at your event booth. Use your website, email list, and social media accounts to ask for direct feedback, host polls, and take surveys. Just remember to ask lots of questions and take your time developing the ideas you get from these talks.

Use tiered pricing to appeal to customers at different price points

This is a tried-and-true tactic for businesses of all sizes, because it changes your customer's decision from a single binary choice (do they want your product at the one price listed, yes or no?) to a mini-buffet of options they can choose from.

Package options

Package deals are another way to win customers. You bundle your next MVP with your current products and services, or you can partner with another business to package your offerings together.

You can create [landing pages](#) for your tiered pricing choices and your packages on your web site. Then promote these pages through your social media and email channels so your customers know they have new options.



Cross selling and upselling

If you have new MVPs to offer, you can sell them as standalone products, but you may sell more if you have a plan to cross-sell or upsell them to your current customers.

When you add cross-sells and upsells, be sure to feature them prominently on your website, especially if they make compelling images.

What do these product options look like?

Let's take the hypothetical example of Snappy's Party Rentals. He started off with a single service – bounce house installation, monitoring, and takedown at parties for \$50 an hour.

1. Tiered Pricing

So far, business is good among customers who are hosting 2-3 hour events. But some prospective customers with all-day events have been skipping Snappy's, and a few churches and schools have been unable to rent from Snappy's for their fundraiser fairs.

Snappy hears what these would-be customers have to say and decides to offer three tiers of pricing for his bounce house rentals:

- an all-day rate for \$250
- the current \$50 per hour rate
- a nonprofit rate of 50% off in exchange for listing Snappy's as a sponsor and giving out promotional material at the event

Snappy's not offering anything new (yet) but he is giving customers some options when it comes to meeting their bounce house rental needs. This gives him the ability to bring in new customers—nonprofits on small budgets and homeowners who host all-day events.





2. Package Options

Snappy might hear from his customers that planning a kids' party takes a huge amount of time. So he might offer a package that includes a 20-minute performance by a magician and delivery of a birthday cake, plates, and napkins to the event site. Grateful parents may respond better to that package (and pay more for it) than a basic rental.

3. Cross-selling

Let's say Snappy has heard from some customers that they would also like something their party guests can enjoy in the pool. He does some research, buys several big rainbow unicorn pool floats, and offers them as a separate rental option for his customers. The unicorn armada is a success, but his higher net worth customers say they're still looking for more "wow" factor for their backyard pool parties.

4. Upselling

Snappy wants to cater to these high net worth customers. Because it's a great time to be alive, he finds an option online he thinks they'll like: a rainbow unicorn pool float encrusted with thousands of crystals. He also pays a set designer to make coordinating sparkly decorations for the outside of his bounce houses to offer a "glam" option at a higher rental rate. Snappy's dolled-up bounce houses and crystal unicorn pool-float party rentals become must-haves among his moneyed clients.



Refine and revisit your MVP and USP to deliver better products

It's important to note that Snappy didn't just plunk down \$6K for a sparkly pool toy without doing his market research and his math. He knew before he made the purchase that there were enough parents (and other adults) in his customer base with the means and the willingness to make it a profitable decision. And he ran a minimum viable product test with some un-sparkly unicorn pool floats to test the pool-toy rental idea first.

It's also crucial to remember that Snappy's new packages and offerings help refine his unique selling position (USP). He's moving from being a run-of-the-mill bounce house provider for children's backyard parties to being a fuller-service party entertainment and rental company for house parties and community events – but he's still firmly focused on his core business of party rentals and services. Well done, Snappy.

Finally, let's talk about how to review your business from top to bottom to make sure you're getting the most from your hard work and to find ways to keep growing and improving.



STEP ELEVEN: REVIEW REGULARLY.

We've reached the final step in the **HostGator Home Business Guide**, and like **listening to your customers**, this step is ongoing. Reviewing your business performance is the key to understanding whether you're reaching your audience and heading toward profitability. Major companies do this all the time, with everything from daily sales goals to quarterly financial filings and annual reports. You don't need to adopt an enterprise-level review schedule, but you do need to keep tabs on these 11 areas to keep your business on track.

1. Review your role as a solopreneur

Are you getting more skilled and confident at running your business? Do you have time to accomplish everything you need to do? Check in every couple of months and ask yourself if there are tasks you don't have the skills for or don't have time to do. Eventually, you may need to hire a contractor or an employee to take on some of that work.

Beyond your work "in" your business, how much time do you spend working "on" your business? Are you building a network of peers and mentors to talk with about successes and setbacks? Have you established great working relationships with your customers? Do you keep up with trends in your industry and attend business-related events?



2. Review your workspace

If you started out storing inventory in your garage, do you still have room to park your car or is it time to rent storage space offsite? Does your office function well without creating family conflict? You may have begun with a laptop at the kitchen table, but you may be ready for a room with a door so you can focus on work and then put it aside during family time. Another thing to think about from time to time: does your office furniture support good posture, or are you throwing your back, neck, and wrists out of whack while you work? A standing desk and a chair with good back support are worthwhile investments if you spend a lot of time at your computer.

3. Review your business plan

Does your original plan still work as a decision-making guide or does it need revisions? Remember that factors outside your business can force you to re-evaluate your plan. Suppliers may change their offerings or raise their prices. The economy's ups and downs can affect your customers' shopping habits. By regularly reviewing your business plan, you'll be better prepared to adapt to these changes.

4. Review your banking, tax and insurance

At least once a year, it's a good idea to look at your business bank, tax preparer, and professional insurance policy to make sure you're getting the right services for your business. For example, does your CPA help you identify the business-related tax deductions you're entitled to claim? Are you ready to pass off your bookkeeping to a professional? Have your professional insurance needs changed? Can you find a better deal on a business checking account? It may be that all your current providers are great, but it's a good idea to check anyway so you don't miss potential savings or better service.

5. Review your web hosting plan and website



If you've had your site template or design for more than a couple of years, you may need to revamp it or replace it to keep up with current mobile-display standards and customer expectations. Are your links all working properly? Does your host still deliver consistent uptime and fast page loads? Do you need to [upgrade your hosting plan](#) for more bandwidth or more domains?

6. Review your email setup



Are you making the most of your professional email address? Once you reach a certain level of business, you may want to create more email addresses with your professional domain, such as admin, bookings, or billing @ yourbusiness.com. These can help you sort your mail and stay more organized, and of course if you hire an employee he or she will need a company email address. Review your email signature, too, to make sure it features the most current version of your business slogan or tagline and that all links work properly.

7. Review your customer listening habits



What are customers telling you about your offerings? What's working well, and what needs improvement? How often do you talk with them in person or hear from them online, via email, and through social media? Has their feedback helped you improve your current products or create new ones? If so, how can you thank them? If not, how can you listen more effectively?

8. Review your sales

Have you reached your breakeven point yet? What does your profit and loss statement look like? Are your sales trending upward, holding steady, or declining? These are all critical questions, and you need to ask these questions often. As part of your sales review and customer conversations, find out if there are payment methods your customers would like you to offer. Making payments more convenient can boost sales, and there are a lot of new payment methods these days.



9. Review your digital marketing efforts

What are the open and click-through rates for your emails and how do they compare to those for similar businesses? How's your social media engagement? More important than the number of followers is how responsive your followers are. Do you have real conversations with them? Are you regularly updating your blog and responding to comments and questions? You may reach a point where it's time to hire out some or all of your digital marketing writing and social media post scheduling so you can focus on your core business.

10. Review your pipeline and products

Are you working on your next MVP or an improved version of an existing product? What are your customers asking for and what are they willing to pay for? Have you developed any tiered pricing options or packages? What about cross-sell and upsell options? More options can lead to more sales and new customers.

11. Review your review process

Before you make that *Inception* reference, rest assured that your whole workday doesn't have to be consumed with reviews. You may only need to review things like your bank, insurance, and workspace once a year, while customer feedback and sales need frequent monitoring. You'll have to develop a schedule that works for your business and then stick to it.

There's one more thing.

Are you rewarding yourself on a regular basis for your efforts? Running your own home-based business has its perks but it's still work. In many ways it can be more work than a 9-to-5 job. So be sure to pencil in regular pats on the back, fun breaks, and time to reflect on everything you're accomplishing with your small business.

**Congratulations, and
we wish you success!**

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