

4) Selected Resources

General online resources:

- <http://www.freewebs.com>
- <http://yahoo.com>
- <http://www.paypal.com>
- <http://searchenginewatch.com/webmasters>. This site provides much information about search engines and tips on getting good position for your site on results pages.
- <http://www.google.com/webmasters>
- <http://www.consumersearch.com/www/software/web-design-software/review>. This is great article discussing the major web design programs and options available to pros and novices alike.
- <http://www.ecommerceguide.com>. This site provides loads of information and resources on e-commerce.
- UPS & USPS Quick Cost Calculators:
 - <http://wwwapps.ups.com/Servlet/QCCServlet>
- https://wwwapps.ups.com/ctc/request?loc=en_US&WT.svl=PNRO_L
- <http://www.maryjanesfarm.com> (This is a well done, successful Moscow farm website.)
- <http://www.greentreenaturals.com> (Another very well done, extensive farm website.)

Some sites I've found useful for connecting consumers with farmers in their local area:

- <http://www.localharvest.org>
- <http://www.eatwild.com> (the clearinghouse of information about the benefits of grassfed meat for us, our animals, and our farms, plus a farm locator)
- <http://www.allorganiclinks.com>
- <http://GreenPeople.org/index.htm>
- <http://www.newfarm.org>
- <http://www.inlandnwfarmersmarket.com>
- <http://www.ruralroots.org>
- <http://attra.ncat.org> (National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service)

My favorite web design book:

- Don't Make Me Think! Steve Krug. Fabulous! A must-read before designing or revamping your site, this book describes a multitude of techniques to make your site effective, useful, and user-friendly.

H) And Finally . . .

With online sales, **Impeccable Customer Service** is even more critical than it is with face-to-face sales. Online buyers are making a leap of faith by doing business with you. They're accustomed to being treated with a high level of professionalism by online sellers, and they expect (or hope for) the same from you. Don't let them down, and you'll build a high level of trust.

The SkyLines Farm approach to customer service with online sales:

Prompt, courteous, informative communication with the buyer at every stage of the process. Here is the typical process for selling fleeces directly from the SkyLines website. (Note: To save time, all my emails are pre-written boilerplate letters, quickly personalized to individual customer).

- 1- Customer writes initial email inquiring about availability of a particular fleece.
- 2- Reply within 24 hours asking for shipping address.
- 3- Customer writes back to provide shipping address.
- 4- Go online to get shipping quote from UPS or USPS.
- 5- Email customer within 24 hours with full quote for fleece including shipping.
- 6- Customer pays via PayPal or check (PayPal sends me notification of payment within hours, check arrives within one week).
- 7- When payment arrives, email customer to confirm receipt of payment and promise shipment within 3 days.
- 8- Within 3 days of receiving payment, pack fleece in shipping box and go online to order UPS pickup for next day (or schedule trip to USPS).
- 9- Within 24 hours of shipping send a final email to customer with a heads up that the fleece has shipped and thanking them for their business. Also include the UPS tracking number.

Many customers make a point of telling me how much they appreciate this attention to detail. The final email sent after shipping also gives me an opportunity to invite buyers to comment on the fleece. It is a major source of the many "Customer Comments" on the farm's website.

first website. As a serious buyer, I was motivated and interested in her dogs so I didn't really care about the ads, but others might very well be turned off.

- Run some tests with the site before signing up, to see how fast or slow their access times are.

Paid web site hosting

I use Cactus Computer in Moscow for my web hosting (\$149/yr including annual domain name registration). The tech support is quite good, they very rarely go down, they're local, and I have even called them at home on a Sunday in an emergency!

G) Promote, promote, promote your site! Just posting your site on the Internet won't get you customers if nobody knows it's there . . .

- Put your web address on everything that carries your business name. You never know who will see it, and it makes you look more professional. For example, include your website address in the signature line for all of your emails.
- Promote your business via newspaper articles, mentions on other people's blogs, e-zines, and try to make sure your web address always appears in the text.
- Develop a printed or electronic newsletter that you send to your customers periodically, offering up-to-date news about your operation, and directing them to your website for more detailed info and/or news. In addition to sending 4-5 emails per year to my entire customer list, I use my the Photo of the Day page to encourage folks to visit my website regularly (and possibly make additional purchases while they're there).
- Add keywords to your website's code that you think your customers might search on. Make sure those words are included in the text of your pages too. For ideas, look at other sites' "Source Code" and read the keywords in their code. What words would people enter in a search engine in order to find *your* business?
- Submit your website to the popular search engines like Yahoo, Google, etc. Go to each engine's site and read their site submission guidelines to get an idea of how a site gets prominent ranking in their searches.
- "Work the net" regularly:
 - Join and contribute regularly to listserves, chatgroups, or blogs that your potential customers might belong to. This is a great way to promote yourself as knowledgeable in your field (assuming your contributions are relevant and useful). Your signature line should always include your web address.
 - Get your website listed on directory sites like EatWild and LocalHarvest. Do periodic online searches for new directory sites and submit your website to them. Most of these directory sites are free, some charge a nominal fee.
- Keep your site fresh and containing useful information. Update it regularly, add new material frequently, get as many good links to your site as you can. All of this means that the search engines will be more likely to find your site, find it useful, and to list you in the first few pages of a buyer's web search.

- own bank account or leave in PayPal for your own shopping. You can also send invoices, statements, and receipts through PayPal.
- What Paypal charges – about 3.5% of each sale, about the same amount credit card companies charge you for accepting credit cards.

Think you need a shopping cart?

1 - If you're going to provide a shopping cart on your site, it absolutely must be easy to use, fast and accurate, and provide a high level of confidence for the buyer. If you can't provide a high quality shopping cart function, forego it for now. Your own online shopping research should tell you how most people react to a poorly designed shopping cart – often with with loss of confidence and irritation.

2 - And, consider that a shopping cart may be efficient and easy for you as the seller, but it's highly impersonal. Seriously think about whether you really want to remove yourself from your customers' buying experience. Questions to consider:

- Are you using a website to try to look like one of the big guys who sell large volumes of product with no human contact, or do you want to use it promote your small-business, unique, hands on, personal approach?
- Do you want to take away the one-on-one personal contact that conducting the sale by email, phone, or in person can give you?

Your decision about a shopping cart will be based partly on your product and its uniqueness, your personality and willingness to deal directly with customers, your available time, quantity of products you expect to sell and the price (shopping carts may be more practical for low-dollar individual sales).

F) The mechanics of putting your site out on the Internet

Domain Name

- Get a domain name for around \$15/year – www.yourfarm.com. This conveys a professional image, and people will be able to search for your business using your actual business name. They'll have a hard time finding you with an address like the one you often get with a free web hosting site (below).
- Register your domain name as soon as possible, even if you're not ready to develop your website yet, before someone else registers the same name and you lose the opportunity.

Site Hosting

Once your site is created, you need someone to "host" your site – store all the files that make up the site on their computer and make it available to anyone on the Internet, 24 hours a day.

Free web site hosting

- The price is right, but you may have to endure banner or sidebar ads on your site, which may be tasteless or irritating or simply look less than professional. And you may get an address like <http://www.freewebs.com/cartangel/farmcollies.htm>. This awkward address would make it very hard for your customers to find you if they didn't already know the address.
- Some free sites provide free software for building your site. Try to check it out first, to see just how easy it is to use. The person who used [freewebs.com](http://www.freewebs.com) above is a friend. She was a total novice who found it very easy to set up her

- FrontPage – Dedicated web design software, fairly easy to learn, inexpensive, runs on Windows. It's been popular for years but was discontinued in 2006.
- Many web hosting sites such as Yahoo!, Freewebs, etc. provide free or inexpensive software that may or may not be easy to use (more on this later later).

C) Optimizing photos on the site

- Color photos are extremely large files and can cause your web pages to take many long minutes to load, especially for users with slow dialup Internet connections. Many digital cameras produce photos that are something like 2 MB in file size and 22" wide image size. When people don't reduce their photo sizes you get the downloads that seem to take forever.
- "Optimizing" photos reduces the size of the photo (in bytes)
 - Photoshop has a "Save for Web" feature that optimizes photos. This feature reduces file dramatically with no reduction in quality when viewed on a monitor. For example, photos come out of my Kodak digital camera at 1 to 4MB in file size, depending on settings I've selected. I crop and optimize every photo in PhotoShop to get the file size under about 150k before it goes on the site. I have a few hundred photos on my site so this is critical to it being user-friendly. There are many less expensive and less feature-laden programs than PhotoShop with similar functions for reducing file size. One may even be included with your digital camera software.
 - If you don't have optimizing software:
 - At the very least, crop (cut out) unnecessary details from the edges of your photos, and reduce the actual photo size to no more than 6" wide.
 - If you can't get your photos under 150k in file size (and even if you can), it's a good idea to begin your pages with a few sentences or paragraphs of text that the visitor can read while waiting for the photos to load.

D) Hardware

- A fast, expensive computer is not necessary for developing and maintaining a website (but always nice to have!). The site with all its pages and graphics is stored on a "host" computer, not yours.
- A digital camera is great, but not essential. You can have your film processor digitize your 35mm photos and put them on a CD for very little money.
- A scanner for digitizing printed matter to post on your website is nice but not necessary either. Many print shops such as Kinko's have scanners available for your use.

E) Getting paid over the Internet with PayPal

- PayPal is an online payment service that works very smoothly and easily. Seller sets up a free account. Buyer also sets up a free account and pays you with credit card or bank account withdrawal. PayPal notifies you within hours when buyer has made a payment to seller's Paypal account. Transfer the funds to your

like and don't like about their sites. Why do you think they work well, or not? Borrow ideas freely, but it's courteous and safer to ask permission to use their photos or graphics (copyright laws apply to the Internet as well as printed matter).

- Be sure to do some online shopping from sites marketing products similar to yours, to see how other vendors are managing the process and caring for their customers. This is an investment in your business, and well worth the time and money. Use your personal experience as a buyer to improve on their methods with your own site.

B) Options for creating the site

1- Hire a website designer. Many competent designers will develop a 3 to 5-page site for you for around \$500 or less. Make sure to look at other sites they've designed and talk to the site owners. Find out if the designer understands your niche market, your way of doing business, and how you want to present yourself to the world.

If you have basic computer skills, I strongly recommend finding a web designer who can teach you how to make basic changes to the site. This is not rocket science. You should be able to add or change information on the site yourself - when you want to - not just when the designer has the time to do it for you. And, if you can do it yourself you'll be much more likely to update the site frequently, adding new content, keeping it fresh and attractive to the search engines.

2- Hire a kid. Many folks have done this successfully, but kids often focus on flash more than content and useability. They don't fully grasp the nuances of effective communications, marketing, and sales, not to mention the fact that they often assume all users will be totally computer savvy and have high-speed Internet access (not all of us do).

3- Do it yourself. I built my current site in 1998 with inexpensive and outdated Mac software (\$49, 1995) called Claris HomePage, and used just about every capability of the software to the max. I'm still using that program to this day. You don't have to start out buying expensive and complicated software just to design a simple, basic site. Start small, tweak your site and work with it until you get it right. You can always upgrade your site with more sophisticated features in the future.

Software suggestions for DIY sites:

- There are many free or fairly inexpensive web design programs out there. Search the Internet for web design software. Ask around among your friends and their kids.
- You can create your site directly in a web browser if you know how to write code (HTML, XHTML, Java, etc.). I personally don't recommend you start out learning a new language while you're also learning the ins and outs of Internet commerce. Just get a simple site created and posted on the web, focus on making it work for you, and then get more sophisticated if you wish.
- Microsoft Word can convert text files to html fairly well. Don't try to build a complex site with it, though, and it doesn't do well converting photos.
- DreamWeaver – More complex program, runs on both Windows and Mac. Includes shopping cart function. Probably much more program than you need, at about \$400.

- A website allows you to use vivid photos to tell your story, to bring the customers right onto the farm, show a real person doing the work, show them all that's involved in producing your high quality product...to bring your farm to life.
- Whether you sell to local customers only or to buyers across the region or the nation, a website can dramatically enhance your sales effort. We all know that every year, more buyers are turning to the Internet to do research before they make purchases, to find local or regional businesses that support their values, or simply to find out business addresses or hours of operation. A website is open 24/7, so your web-surfing customers can learn more about you and your unique business at their own pace. And it can save you much time spent repeatedly explaining the same basic questions about your business.

3) Getting started with a farm website (or improving the effectiveness of an existing one)

A) Begin with a plan. Some things to think about:

- What do you want the site to accomplish? Full-scale online sales, to simply promote your business, or both?
- How much time are you willing to spend promoting your site and updating it? If the answer is "Not very much," then keep the site simple, with basic information about your business that will be useful to your customers. If you're not going to update the site regularly, please do not include "This site last updated on ____" If visitors see a date 12 months ago, they very likely will just click away.
- Basic useful information could include: When you have product available, how and where it can be purchased, how to get to your farm, your hours, your contact info, your future plans, maybe a fast-loading photo or two of you, your family, your farm, your fields, your animals, etc. This may not seem like a lot, but it gives you a presence on the Internet, it says you're serious about your business...and you can always expand the site in the future. Many buyers enjoy being able to put a face to the products they purchase.
- If you believe more information will help you sell product, think about:
 - What exactly do you want to tell your customers about your business, and in how much detail? About you? About your family? About your products?
 - Do you want to show them photos of your farm?
 - Is it suitable to show them close-up photos of your products?
 - Do you want to convey something special about your business? Maybe your organic, hands-on management techniques? Your commitment to environmental quality, your unique knowledge?
- What exactly do you want people who visit your website to do next? Buy from you online? Come to your farm? Come see you at the Farmer's Market? Just remember your name? Tell them what you want them to do.
- **Important:** I highly recommend that you spend some serious research time on the Internet, looking at sites of businesses similar to yours. Consider what you



MARKETING WITH A FARM WEBSITE

Taking Your Sales to the Next Level:

A Workshop on Increasing Your Farm Marketing Skills

April 10-11, 2008, Clarkston WA

Presented by Melissa Lines

SkyLines Farm Sheep & Wool, Harvard, ID

www.skylinesfarm.com; 208/875-8747

1. Overview of SkyLines Farm

- About 65 acres near Potlatch, ID, cross-fenced to 15+ paddocks for intensive rotational grazing.
- Managing the farm and the sheep by organic methods (not certified) since 1992.
- Breeding 60+ Romney and Romney-cross ewes.
- Breeding, training, and placing Great Pyrenees livestock guardian dogs.
- Direct-marketing five products:
 - 1 - Premium natural-colored & white wool fleeces and processed wool for handspinners.
 - 2 - Purebred Romney and crossbred sheep breeding stock.
 - 3 - Great Pyrenees livestock guardian dogs for predator-friendly flock protection.
 - 4 - Organically raised, grassfed freezer (locker) lamb.
 - 5 - Educational opportunities for shepherds: apprenticeships, workshops, farm immersions.
 - 6 - (Coming Soon) Educational products for shepherds: Audio and video tapes of workshops; Printed reference materials such as booklets on organic parasite control, lambing management, training livestock guardian dogs, etc.

2. Marketing on the Internet

- Why I chose to market my products primarily over the Internet.
- Benefits of a farm website:
 - With a website you can reach millions of potential customers (or just the local customers you want to reach) with an incredible array of details about your farm, your products, your philosophy and farming practices...at very low cost. Just compare the cost of even small print ads in local or regional publications with the volume of text and photos you can provide on a website...for a fraction of the cost.