

Startup Business Checklist 2010

Steve Smith - SteveSmithBlog.com

Below is my current checklist for startup businesses in 2010. This is meant to be relatively industry-agnostic and focuses primarily on online components of the business (meaning, it may not apply to businesses which avoid the Internet for whatever reason). I've included numerous links to more information and references. Checklists are a great way to ensure you don't forget important things - check out the [Checklist Manifesto](#) for how one doctor is attempting to apply this logic to medicine.



If you're not reading this on my blog, you're likely missing out on the latest updates to this post - click here to view the source article: [Startup Business Checklist 2010](#)

() Domain(s)

You're going to need a domain name. Maybe more than one. At a minimum, unless you're trying to be clever with an oddball root domain like del.icio.us or bit.ly, you're going to want a .com address. If you find several variants, choose one that is your canonical (the one you want everyone to use) URL, and ensure the other domains either 301 redirect to the main URL, or have some content that sends links to your main URL. I use GoDaddy for all of my domains, but there are plenty of other domain registrars available. You shouldn't need to pay more than \$10 per year for a domain (not counting any other services).

- [GoDaddy](#) (direct link) | [Go Daddy \\$7.49 .com Domain Sale](#) (sale/affiliate link)
- [DirectNIC](#)
- [Register.com](#)

I've personally used each of the above services, and they're ranked in order of my preference.

Note that you may get some extra SEO benefit from having an established domain (one that has been registered for some time) as well as a domain that does not expire for a long time (expiration more than a year or two in the future). A useful tool for checking the status of a registered domain is WHOIS, which most domain registrars support (somewhere) or which you can do from [Whois.com](#) (which apparently also does domain registration but I can't vouch for them).

- [WHOIS Lookup on Whois.com](#)

() Email

I've found that Google Apps (the free edition) is quite sufficient as a starting point for most start-up companies. You get a ton of space, a great user interface that doesn't require you to install anything locally and that you can use from anywhere, and virtually no spam. For free (with non-intrusive ads). And of course you can upgrade to give them money if and when you need to do so.

It's worth grabbing the domain and then email early on, as many of the steps below will require these. Also, with the advent of OAuth and OpenID for authentication, you can very likely use your Google Email, Facebook, or Twitter account as your login for many of the other services listed here, saving you from having one more set of credentials to remember.

() Web Hosting

I've used each of the following for web hosting and have had good experiences with each one:

- [ORCSWeb](#) - Bar none the highest quality managed hosting company for Microsoft .NET applications. If you want someone else to deal with keeping your web servers updated, online, and running 24/7 so you can deal with what your company actually does, call them.
- [DiscountASP.Net](#) - Very affordable and I know lots of people who swear by them. Also dedicated to Microsoft solutions, as far as I know.
- [Dreamhost](#) - I've used them for Wordpress blogs (and Michelle's blog is hosted there now) and they're inexpensive and their tools make getting started very easy. I'm not familiar with them beyond Wordpress, but of course they offer other hosting options as well.
- [WP Engine](#) - Recommended by Jason Cohen, WP Engine takes Wordpress to the next level.

What you need for web hosting really depends on what kind of business you're in. If you're building an online application, you probably will need a database, the ability to run code, etc. If you're launching a non-Internet business, then you might only need a basic marketing website, which you're best off creating via a content management server (CMS) package.

() Content Management Server

Again, don't underestimate [Wordpress](#). It's free and there are plugins for nearly everything. However, one of the most common questions you'll find in the Wordpress communities is "How do I make it not look like a blog?" If you want a site you can manage without having to use developer tools and FTP, you definitely want to investigate content management servers or CMSes. In v3 of Wordpress, which offers post types, there are themes available that let you do a lot without having to drop down to the raw PHP or HTML.

In the Microsoft space, there are quite a few CMSes to choose from, including many commercial offerings. My current favorite is [Umbraco](#), which is a nice open-source CMS that can handle medium- to large-scale sites. It's built on .NET and very extensible. One of my Umbraco-certified friends, [Craig Palenshus](#), uses Umbraco to manage the [NimblePros' web site](#). You can also use [Graffiti](#) or [DotNetNuke](#) or any number of other commercial CMS offerings.

Even if you're building an online business built on custom software, it's worth considering a CMS for your company site. Remember, you may not want to use your developer resources for every change to your home page's welcome text.

() Analytics

Another free Google tool, [Google Analytics](#) is really a no-brainer. It's not perfect. It's even a little shady at times (like, if a user has ever come to your site by way of any search on Google, they are forever after categorized as a visitor from Google, not an organic visitor. It's still an amazing tool for the (free - not even ads - you just are giving them loads of data for free) price

tag. Once you have an account, you just need to use the unique identifier or script blog in your blog and on your web site.

() Blog

Your company needs a website, but it probably also should have a blog. People want to know what you're doing, and your marketing brochure site (or social network, or whatever) doesn't let them get to know you. If you just want something for under \$10/mo with no technical skill required that you can do just about anything with, then [Wordpress](#) is the way to go (see Dreamhost above). If you're a developer or have developers on your team and you have some **valid reason** why it's **important** that you be able to change the code used to run your blog, then if PHP isn't your thing you might look at these open source .NET alternatives:

- [BlogEngine.Net](#) - [Brendan's blog](#) is now running this
- [Graffiti](#) - My blog currently uses Graffiti
- [dasBlog](#) - [ScottHa's blog](#) uses dasBlog (of course, since he's one of the main developers of dasBlog)

You'll also want to use [Feedburner](#) (now Google) for your feeds. Saves you bandwidth and offers some nice features.

() Logo

You're going to need a logo. You might need one for your company and one for your product. But you'll need at least one. If you know a good designer (like [Craig](#)), you can have them create one for you. Otherwise, there are services out there that can produce a lot of logos for your consideration via a winner-take-all contest where you offer the prize.

- [LogoTournament.com](#) - \$250 prize minimum. I think they're the dominant player in this category of sites.
- [99Designs.com](#) - Same idea, about the same price, minimum

I've also used [LogoBee.com](#) successfully in the past.

() Customer Feedback

Once you get some customers, even the non-paying beta users and early adopters, you're going to want to know what they think. Talk to as many of them as you can - there's no substitute for that - but to get *scale* you're going to want a tool to manage feedback. The two sites that make this very easy are:

- [UserVoice.com](#) - My personal preference.
- [GetSatisfaction.com](#) - Seems to be roughly the same as UserVoice, but much longer to say and spell... Either one is probably a good choice over (a) nothing or (b) trying to build your own.

() Project Management

You'll need some way to identify things that need doing, prioritizing these things, and seeing them progress from ideas to completed tasks. There are about 6 billion project management software packages out there. I've used a small fraction of these and have developed some opinions. I personally prefer lean and mean and simple to big and complex and does everything you might never need. If you're already using UserVoice or GetSatisfaction, you might be able to use these for your project management, as well. More likely, though, you're going to want another tool.

- [37Signals.com](http://37signals.com) - BaseCamp has a huge following and has pretty low initial requirements/costs. For a startup, it's probably worth considering.
- AgileZen.com - For simple software feature/bug tracking, a kanban board works great (literally, on a wall or whiteboard). If you need something virtual, though, AgileZen is a nice tool for that job.
- [Axosoft OnTime](http://Axosoft.com) - If you need more than just a kanban tracking board, OnTime probably has the features you need. It's a very full-featured software bug/feature/project management tool. I have a love/hate relationship with it.
- [Pivotal Tracker](http://PivotalTracker.com) - A free kanban/sprint planning tool.

() Source Control (software development)

Assuming your business requires some custom software development, you're going to need a place to safely store your code. Depending on how selection above for web hosting, you might be able to host your source control on your hosted server(s). If not, you can install something in your office or use one of many online options. The de facto standard free solution remains Subversion, but distributed source control platforms are becoming more popular every day, with the two leaders being Git and Mercurial. If you go the Subversion route, I recommend [TortoiseSvn](http://TortoiseSvn.com) and [VisualSvn Server](http://VisualSvnServer.com).

I haven't used hosted source control before, but these are the three I hear are the best:

- Unfuddle.com - Hosted Subversion (and Git)
- Github.com - Hosted Git
- Bitbucket.org - Hosted Mercurial

Don't forget you can also use public open source code repositories for free (assuming you have few secrets):

- Codeplex.com - Microsoft open source projects with source control, issue tracking, and more. Support for TFS, SVN, and Mercurial clients for source control.
- SourceForge.net - The largest open source repository in the world
- [Google Project Hosting \(Google Code\)](http://GoogleProjectHosting.com) - More free stuff from Google - supports SVN and Mercurial.

() Continuous Integration (software development)

If your business requires custom software development, you should have a build server that performs builds (and tests) every time your team checks in changes to the application. If you don't, you're doing it wrong. My two favorites are:

- [TeamCity](#) - Free for small projects, worth it for larger ones, and almost entirely web-based setup and configuration. <http://www.google.com/reader>
- [CruiseControl.Net](#) - The grand-daddy of CI servers, CC.NET is full-featured but requires a fair bit of manual XML file tweaking to set up. Be sure to get CCTray to go with it - that app rocks.

I've also used [Visual Studio's build server](#), which with the 2010 edition is quite easy to set up and use as well. I haven't used [Hudson](#), but I'm told it's also good (Jason Cohen says he and most CruiseControl users he knows have switched to Hudson, which has "same basic tech, much better implementation. Also has better support for things like ruby instead of mainly being for Java.").

() Social Networking

You're going to want to get social networking accounts that are as close to your domain and/or product name as possible. The following listed ones are the minimum I recommend. Even if you have nothing to say right now, it doesn't cost you anything to set up these accounts and just sit on them for when you do decide you want to use them.

- () [Twitter](#) Account (usually in addition to your own, if you have one)
- () [YouTube](#) Account
- () [LinkedIn Group](#) and/or [Company Page \(coming soon\)](#)
- () [Facebook Page \(Fan Page\)](#)
- () [StumbleUpon](#) Account
- () Other Sites via [Knowem.com](#) (checks hundreds of sites at once!)

If you do start needing to manage multiple social networking accounts, I've found [HootSuite.com](#) to be invaluable. It lets you manage them all centrally, delegate permissions to others as needed without sharing the actual account credentials, and it works from anywhere (web app). A nice option for a non-web solution is [TweetDeck](#) (which I used until I switched to HootSuite).

Another option if you have partners/cofounders is [cotweet](#), which offers a free account you can use to manage the company twitter account together. It includes the ability to assign things to your colleagues for follow up, or to send/receive notifications about who is "on duty." Good stuff if you're seriously looking to have an active presence on twitter.

() E-Commerce (if applicable)

- () Checking Account

Lots of choices. Personally I prefer a bank with a physical presence near me so that I can meet a real person if problems arise, rather than going through their automated or offshored phone system.

- () Payment Processor

Lots of choices again. I've used and have generally heard good things about [Authorize.Net](#). I've heard good and bad things about [PayPal](#). And of course you may be able to bypass dealing with this level of detail entirely if you are selling a virtual product, in which case you might use a service like [FastSpring](#), which NimblePros uses to sell its [Nitriq code analyzer](#) and [Atomiq code de-](#)

[duplicator](#) products. Note some of the services listed under Storefront application can also be leveraged to process your payments.

() Storefront application

Many choices. You can roll your own. There are open source solutions available like [nopcommerce](#) for ASP.NET. You can also integrate with services like [Google Checkout](#), [Yahoo Stores](#), or [Amazon Payments](#). Personally I've gone the roll your own approach in the past, but in most cases I would recommend building on an existing product or service, especially as a quick way to get to market.

() Google Alerts

() Find and monitor 3-6 competitors

[Google Alerts](#) is another perpetually beta service offered by the giant company. If you haven't used it before, basically you give it search terms you're interested in (like, say, your competitors' product and company names, along with your own), and then it will email you whenever Google finds new content that matches these terms. You can set it to batch up the results and email you once per day or per week, or to email you immediately. Be sure to monitor your twitter alias and blog name if these differ from your product/company name. I recommend getting the emails as they happen, as this lets you quickly join the conversation when it involves your product in the blogotwitterosphere.

() Update Personal LinkedIn

() Answer (and Ask) Questions on LinkedIn related to your industry

() Find other communities where you can become known as an authority

() Find and Connect with Bloggers, Twitter Users in your industry's community

How you do this will depend on your industry and your existing relationship with its community. Use your favorite search engine to search for articles and news of interest to your industry, and note the top blogs that come back from such searches. Begin by following these people using your RSS reader (Google Reader is nice if you don't have a preference; Microsoft Outlook also supports RSS subscriptions). Most prominent bloggers are likely to also be active on Twitter at this point, so follow them there as well. You'll most likely have separate accounts for personal use and for your brand/company/product, so choose whether it makes sense to follow these individuals with either or both such accounts.

Check this off when you've found 5 influentials in your industry whom you are now following. Make a point to engage with them via their blog and/or twitter.

() Grade and Track Web site

Once you have your web site up, it's a good idea to monitor it using a tool like [WebsiteGrader.com](#). This is separate from looking at your site's traffic via Analytics (above). WebsiteGrader will give you a bunch of metrics related to how your site performs from technical, search engine optimization, and social media perspectives. I suggest logging the main metrics for your website (and twitter) and comparing yours with your main competitors on a periodic

(monthly or quarterly) basis. You'll find Grader apps for Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Books, Press Releases and more at Grader.com.

() Scout labs or similar tracking

You'll want to track some of the things you discover over time so you can see how you're doing compared to your competition. [ScoutLabs](#) appears to do this very well, though I haven't used their product myself (it's not necessarily cheap). However, it does look very impressive. Assuming you don't have tons of VC money to spend, an alternative is to use Excel or a Google Spreadsheet to track your Twitter followers, Feedburner subscribers, WebsiteGrader score, and competitors' scores over time. And you can make the pretty charts yourself, too.

() Subscribe to your own personal LinkedIn RSS feed

Assuming you're using an RSS reader regularly already, this can be an easy way to keep up with your professional contacts, and expand your network. The RSS feed should be here:

<http://www.linkedin.com/rssAdmin?display=>

assuming you have a LinkedIn account already and are signed in.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to [Jason Cohen \(a smart bear\)](#) for adding a few great ideas to the list.