

» THE ENTREPRENEUR'S E-BUSINESS BATTLE PLAN: EMAIL ALIASES & AUTORESPONDERS

Cost effective and manageable tactics for the micro or small business tackling e-business from an entrepreneurial point of view

PART ONE

By Jean St-Amand, B. COMM.

The entrepreneur is a one-person army, required to do everything from developing strategy, to delegating assignments, to the hands-on "stuff" of day to day business. That's a lot of hats to wear. So why would an entrepreneur want to take on the challenge of e-business if it means more hats must be worn?

It doesn't have to be that way. With the right awareness and planning, there are a variety of options available to the entrepreneur that are both effective and manageable. In this article, I highlight email aliases and autoresponders - e-business tools that can offer exceptional value with the right planning supporting them. And you may already have them and not know it!

First, a word about planning

An important step before you get involved in e-business is to plan effectively, starting with your objectives. What do you hope to get out of e-business? What kind of return on investment will satisfy you? What role do you expect e-business to play for your business now and in the future. Without articulating your objectives (ideally, documenting them for future reference), most businesses will not succeed in making e-business a seamless part of their operations. If you need help, get help - preferably from someone that knows a bit about your business and about technology. Don't skip the planning stage - it's too important to overlook.

Email Aliases

An email alias is nothing more than a phony email address. Addresses like `info@` and `sales@yourcompany.com` are usually an alias, which is redirected to an individual's email address once it hits the webserver. Often, email aliases - either a fixed number of them or perhaps an unlimited number of them - are included in your website hosting account. Ideally, you can create, modify and delete these aliases whenever you want.

A common use of an alias, as in cases like `info@` is to supply your customers with an email address that is independent of an

employee. That way if Bob Smith leaves and is no longer my sales director, I don't have to reprint the brochure of which I still have 2000 copies because I put `bsmith@mycompany.com` as the contact on it.

That's the common way to use an alias. But what about more clever ways to put such a tool to use?

Aliases provide an excellent means of tracking the success of offline communications, like advertising for example. Use an ad-specific alias like `tribune123@mycompany.com` in your newspaper ad. Any emails coming in to that address have clearly come from one source. The same way "Ask for Time-Life Operator 8752" is a means to track which television station and time slot encouraged your call, email aliases can be used to do essentially the same thing. The challenge is to offer a reason for them to email you in the first place. That's up to you.

Aliases are also a good way to "departmentalize" incoming email. Setting up departmental emails, like `sales@` and `support@` gives you several benefits. First, the emails coming in to those addresses are essentially "pre-qualified" for their content. You know, at least by category, what the email is about, and can address it accordingly. This approach may also keep you organized, making it easier to sift through emails - it's harder to lose something through the cracks if the cracks are squeezed shut.

Aliases may help you look more professional, in that you appear more organized, and perhaps even larger than you really are.

Aliases help you to expand your business without suffering growing pains within your email system, and manage the delegation of responsibility. An alias can be redirected to a new employee, or a different employee within your company at any time.

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Email Autoresponders

An email autoresponder is an automated response send back to the sender of any incoming email to a particular address. When I'm on vacation, for example, my personal email address could have an autoresponder on it that tells the sender that I'm away and that I will respond to all inquiries when I return. I could also provide the name and contact details for another person in my office that could look after them if their matter is urgent.

Again, this is a common usage, and autoresponders are very often included (either a fixed number or an unlimited) in your website hosting plan. Having direct access to the creation, editing and deletion of the autoresponders is a key element to putting them to work for your business.

Another more interesting use of an autoresponder might be to have an autoresponder setup on coupon@mycompany.com, that I change every month, for example. When an email is sent to that address (perhaps I use it on my website or in a print ad in the newspaper), the sender instantly receives a reply that can be printed and redeemed for 25% off their next purchase in-store for that calendar month. Autoresponders can be used to provide the recipient with links as well, so why not link them back to your website?

Some autoresponders will allow you to add an attachment to the email, making them even more powerful. Imagine having a form on your website for a customer to fill out to order a catalogue or a product spec sheet. When the form is submitted, it is sent to the catalogue@yourcompany.com. You instantly receive their contact information, and they receive an autoresponder email with the catalogue attached in PDF (Adobe's Printable Document Format)

form. You can then follow up with them in a few days to thank them for requesting your catalogue and offer to assist them with their purchase (privacy issues, etc. surrounding such a tactic being a separate discussion).

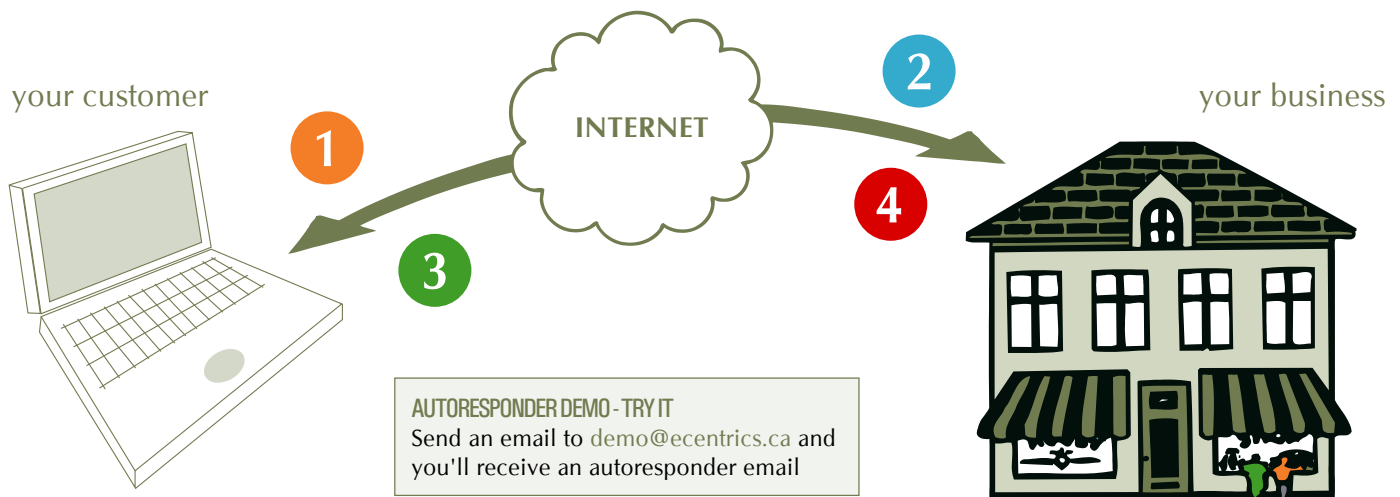
Conclusion

There are a variety of ways email aliases and autoresponders can be used to support your business. Your first piece of homework will be talk to your website host provider (if you already have one - if not, make this part of your "must have" shopping list) to find out if your plan includes them and how you can access them. Next, you'll need to devise an effective plan to use them to your benefit - every business is different, so you'll simply have to find the use that best suits the way your business is run. And finally, you'll simply have to experiment a little. You'll find some tactics work better than others with your particular audience, and you'll have to make adjustments as you go. Ultimately, if you've been effective in your objective setting, you'll find email aliases and autoresponders valuable tools that produce real results for your business and are easily managed - even with all the hats you wear.

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THE EMAIL AUTORESPONDER IN ACTION



1 your customer sends an email to pricelist@yourcompany.com

2 your webserver autoresponds with an email to your customer containing your current price list

3 the customer receives the autoresponder (price list) email

4 You follow-up with customer where required/desireable