

Affiliate Classroom

Volume 5 Number 2
January 2009
AffiliateClassroom.com

The journal of affiliate marketing and management best practices

**A Wise
Beginner's
Roadmap**

**Essential
Tools
and
Skills**

**Choosing Your
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**Starting an
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Affiliate Classroom Magazine is published monthly by Affiliate Classroom, Inc.™ Back issues are available at AffiliateClassroom.com.

The Wise Affiliate's Guide to Getting Started

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Affiliate marketing is a method of selling other businesses' stuff, for which they pay you a commission.

Affiliate Marketing Yin and Yang

You've been itching to get out of a rut. You've heard there's a way to work out of your home, be your own boss, and still make pretty good money, sometimes riches. All true. It's called affiliate marketing. However, you're also skeptical because, having been around a while, you know there are lots of scams around. It's easy to put big promises in bold letters. It's another thing to deliver. You are wise.

Combine that enthusiasm for reaching out for something new with that sharp caution and you're already on your way toward your new future in affiliate marketing.

The Learning Curve

Like any new activity, there are lots of things to learn. Apart from a ton of terminology like PPC, keywords, and conversion rates — all of which is simple, really — there is the usual bootstrap dilemma. Where to start? How do you know where to go to find out where to start?

But notice something interesting. You've downloaded this magazine, so you've already overcome the first big hurdle. Now it's on to some specifics.

What Is Affiliate Marketing?

The first thing to learn is just what affiliate marketing is. Go to Google.com or type this into your browser's search box: define: affiliate marketing. The first few entries all say pretty much the same thing. Affiliate marketing is a method of selling other businesses' stuff, for which they pay you a commission.

Sometimes that commission results when someone clicks a URL on your site linking to that other business, after which they make a purchase. You get paid. (Cool, huh?) In another scenario, someone searching Google or Yahoo for a product clicks on an ad (called pay-per-click ads), the ones you see at the top or on the side. That sends the users somewhere they eventually go through the first scenario. Again, you get paid.

"This is starting to sound pretty good," your enthusiastic side is saying.

Still, right about now that other half of you (the skeptical part) should have a few hairs on the back of the neck starting to rise. You're right. It's not quite that easy. Anyone can do this, but there are a few preliminary steps.

Pick a Niche

You've probably heard you need to build a website. (They're extremely useful, but that's not always true. We'll get to that in a minute.) Before you even click the mouse, though, you'll need to do some thinking. Luckily, thinking doesn't cost anything.

To build a website or create ads, you first have to decide what to sell. The possibilities are endless; every conceivable kind of business large and small has what is called an affiliate program. That's the official arrangement between you and them by which they get sales and you get commissions.

You'll need to choose whether to sell cameras, romantic honeymoon trips, wine, DVDs, jewelry, clothing, gardening tools, insurance, cell phones, weight loss programs — like I said, the list is endless. Fortunately, there are several aids to help you decide.

One excellent method is simply to gravitate towards your personal passion. Affiliate marketing requires a lot of patience, effort, and creativity, if you are to succeed. Having a passion for what you sell will help motivate you to keep going through all the inevitable hurdles you'll face.

Another way, and this can be combined with the first, is to sign up at any or several of what are called affiliate networks. These are middlemen businesses between you and the merchants who sell goods and services. They take care of pooling commissions and paying you, provide you with marketing materials, sales tracking reports, and more. There's no charge, but you do have to apply, and some may turn you down (though that's rare). Plunge ahead regardless.

Some of the more prominent networks are Commission Junction (<http://www.cj.com>), LinkShare (<http://www.linkshare.com>), ShareASale (<http://www.shareasale.com>), and ClickBank (<http://www.clickbank.com>). They all have their pros and cons, and the Affiliate Classroom forum can give you lots of views and real-life experiences from people who have been there.

Once you've settled on a niche or two (best not to overdo it until you get your sea legs), you can sign up and start building the mechanisms for selling in that area.

A Bit about Budget

One of the best things about starting an affiliate marketing business is just how inexpensive it is to begin. If you already have a computer and Internet connection (which we assume, since you're reading this), you're far more than halfway there.

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You'll almost certainly want to have a website, or two, or 20. (Here again, keep the numbers low until you get your feet, and head, thoroughly wet.) That almost always means you'll need to pay a few bucks for a domain name (by going to GoDaddy.com, for example), the name associated with your website (like affiliateclassroom.com). You'll also need a hosting service, which is often supplied as part of the price for the domain name. Avoid the totally free services. Your needs will quickly exceed what they offer, and it isn't worth saving a few dollars a month when it comes time to move your site(s) elsewhere.

Building Your Site(s)

Once you've selected a niche and signed up for a domain name and host, you're ready to actually start building the site itself. Whoo, boy, are you probably nervous now. Unless you come from a computer technowizard background, how in the world do you get started doing that?

Relax. Millions of people who know zip about the difference between HTML and XML have done it. Many hosting companies will even put up a simple first page for you and provide you with editing tools that make it super simple to create your site by point, click, and type. It will also provide you with a no-skill-needed way to upload any new website files you will create. No expertise required.

Still, it's not a bad idea to learn a little basic HTML, just to take the edge off that nervousness. The more you know, the easier it will be to make changes and to handle those quirky problems that invariably arise. Wikiversity (http://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Web_Design/Learning_Basic_HTML_and_CSS) is one good place to get started.

Buying Your Site(s)

Of course, if you have the money and/or prefer to manage others who handle the details, you can buy a site or pay someone to build it for you. Elance.com, Guru.com, and other websites have tons of hungry designer/programmers just waiting to assist at any task or to create everything from A-Z.

What Your Website Shows/Does

Whether you build it or buy it, your website will need to provide graphics, text, and functionality that allow you to actually generate sales. That's the whole point of affiliate marketing, after all. Your site can be something as simple as just a few lines of snappy copy encouraging visitors to click on a link to the merchant who sells the stuff you tout.

Eventually, it will contain much more. That can include tutorials, product reviews, a customer feedback forum, your blog discussing the product and its competitors, and on and on. That's another great thing about affiliate marketing. You can start with something very simple and continue to build on it forever, allowing you not only to make money, but to express your enthusiasm and creativity.

Advertising

Once you have a website built around the niche you've chosen, you need to get people to come visit it. Given the millions of other sites out there (all of which have been around longer than yours), that can seem like a daunting task. Good — your natural skepticism is still working in your favor. Now let your enthusiasm work for you, too. People start out in affiliate marketing fresh every day. Many have done very well, so you can, too. They all started out doing the basics. You can, too.

Search Engines

When your site goes live, the major search engines (Google, Yahoo, and MSN) will eventually find out you exist. If you search on something related to what you sell, you could (in theory) ultimately find your site on the list.

However, that list could be really, really long, and filled with websites listed before yours. Not good. Your task is to get closer to the top (realistically, on the first three pages if you are ever to be found that way).

We don't have space here to discuss all the creative ways to do that. Luckily, Affiliate Classroom has tutorials that will teach you ones that actually work. They cover such things as generating traffic via PPC, getting links from other sites, building an email newsletter list that brings you visitors, posting on forums, etc.

Sure, your skepticism is telling you that with millions of websites out there, your odds are pretty low. For once, your enthusiasm is wiser than your skepticism. Your odds are actually pretty good, if you have a little creativity and a willingness to put in the effort (followed by a lot of patience). Done right, you'll find that you can actually get a good page rank (as it's called).

PPC (Pay Per Click)

One highly effective way to advertise your website, and the product it's designed to sell, is to pay for ad space on Google, Yahoo, MSN, or other search engines. Google's AdWords program does indeed send millions of visitors to thousands of websites every day.

But, here the tips of your skeptic's ears should be getting warm: it can be expensive. You pay anytime someone clicks on your ad, hence the name and the acronym. That can be anywhere from a few cents to a few dollars per click. Even on the lower end of the range, though, that can add up quickly to, as they used to say, real money. A thousand clicks per day on an ad that costs only five cents per click is still \$50 a day. That's serious money for most novice affiliate marketers, especially when multiplied by 30 days.

But, as an experiment and an investment, PPC can be worthwhile, if the campaigns are executed well. In fact, if it's done really well, it isn't even

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mandatory that you have a website at all. It's possible to simply direct visitors straight to the merchant selling the product you advertise.

Before you spend a dime, though, be sure to get some education on how to maximize your PPC budget. (Yes, that's one more thing that Affiliate Classroom teaches extremely well. Hey, we're allowed to plug our own stuff, right? We're affiliate marketers too, after all.)

Links and Word of Mouth

There's one final pair of major ways to advertise your site, and they're related. Other sites can link to you, sending you traffic you don't pay for and eliminating the search engine problem entirely. (Also, the more they link to you, the higher you will tend to be ranked on the search engine listings, so you get a double-good whammy.)

Links are one form of word of mouth, and a very good one. But there are still millions of people who can potentially find you simply through old-fashioned word of mouth. That can be face-to-face or phone communication, email, forums, YouTube videos, and who knows what tomorrow.

Here again, there are many ways to stimulate and encourage word of mouth — among the best kind of traffic, since a recommendation predisposes someone to you and your product. Learning those ways should be high on your list of things to explore as a new affiliate marketer.

Attitude

Perhaps the one thing you will need as an affiliate marketer, though, is something that perhaps can't be taught, even while it can be supported or undermined: attitude. By "attitude," I don't mean arrogance. Jerks usually lose in the long run in this people-oriented business. I mean confidence, persistence, a can-do spirit. It's encapsulated by the frame of mind of someone who gets up in the morning and says "How can I do better today than I did yesterday?"

Through all the hurry-up-and-waiting, the ups and downs, the frustrations and joys of affiliate marketing, this is the one thing that will carry you through. As the line in an old musical number says, "Ya just gotta have heart. Lots and lots of heart."

Good luck!

About the Author

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Choosing Your First Niche

By Kathy Jackson
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As an affiliate marketer on the Internet, you have the very same opportunity to make sales and earn money as the biggest multinational corporations have.

So you want to start your very own affiliate marketing online business. Good for you, and welcome to the best opportunity that has ever existed on earth. The Internet is the most effective "equalizer" that's ever been launched. Everybody — rich or poor, old or young, fit or frail — gets the very same Internet.

Those who can pay more or who feel more powerful or more entitled can't get an Internet that is any better than the one that everybody else on earth can get. And the Internet levels the playing field for all of those who want to make money online.

As an affiliate marketer on the Internet, you have the very same opportunity to make sales and earn money as the biggest multinational corporations have.

The first decision that you have to make is where you want to start. You have to choose a niche where you will offer products and services for a percentage of the sales price. The niche you choose is an important decision, and one that you need to consider very carefully.

Over time, you will very likely have a presence in many different niches; but your choice of your first niche is going to set the tone for your future success.

Here are the criteria you need to use when choosing your first affiliate marketing niche:

1. Choose a niche in which the topic interests or even fascinates you.

Liking or loving a topic isn't the only consideration for choosing a niche, of course, but you're going to spend a lot of time thinking about and writing about the topic of the niche you choose. The more interested you are in the topic, the easier it is to continue to think about it day in and day out.

It's always best if you can choose a niche about which you already have a great deal of knowledge. Prior knowledge will lessen the learning curve considerably. For example: if you are a weekend scuba diver, you already know all about the kinds of equipment that scuba divers need and use. You also know about what they

see and feel when they dive, because you've been there and done that yourself. You've eliminated the learning curve altogether. But wait — there are more things to consider than just if you like a topic or not.

2. Choose a niche that isn't too big or too small.

Narrow your market down. You can't sell everything to everybody. You can't compete with sites like Yahoo or Amazon. You need to choose one particular subniche within a larger niche. But you can't narrow the choice too far — if you do, you won't have a customer base large enough to sell to.

Lots of markets, such as cars, computers, fishing, etc., are large enough to encompass many different niches and subniches. You do want to narrow your niche choice down. For example, you can't sell cars and all of the parts for all of the cars ever manufactured. But you can sell parts for American-made cars.

3. Choose a niche with a large customer base.

Narrowing down your niche choice to a market that isn't too big or too small is essential. However, you still must choose a niche that has a large enough customer base so that even if you get just a tiny percentage of the potential customers, you'll still make a nice living.

The rule of thumb is that the more narrow the market, and the larger the potential customer base, the better chance you will have of becoming a successful affiliate marketer.

4. Choose a niche with a potential customer base that is affluent enough to purchase related products and services.

Lots and lots of people want "stuff" they can't afford. That's always been the way of the world. Having a large number of people who **want** the products and services that you'll be promoting isn't enough. They have to actually be affluent enough to **buy** them.

Finding out just how affluent your potential customer base is can be a bit of a challenge, but not one that can't be overcome. Visit the blogs and forums where the topics relate to your niche and to the products and services you'll be selling. It's a good idea to join these blogs and forums and get to know the people who populate them. You'll be able to determine their level of affluence.

5. Choose a niche that ranks high in the number of search engine searches.

Go to Google and use their free keyword search tool at <http://>

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adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal. Type your main keyword into the box. Type in the characters displayed so that Google knows that you are a real live person and not another computer. Hit the "Get Keyword Ideas" button.

What you'll get is a chart beginning with the keyword you typed in and followed by a list of related key words. Look at the third column. If the first number in this column is 10,000,000 or more, that means that a lot of searches have been conducted and you probably have a winning idea. If that number is low, you might want to reconsider your niche options.

If there are a lot of searches for the main keyword in your niche, then there is a large customer base for the products and services that you'll be promoting.

Look further down the list now and you'll find related keywords and see how often they have been searched.

6. Choose a niche that is popular but not overly crowded with affiliate marketers.

There is software out there that claims to be able to tell you how many affiliate marketers are marketing a particular product. Frankly, I wouldn't waste my money on such software. The affiliate marketing arena is fluid. Affiliate marketers come and go. Some are active, while many others are not.

The best way to determine just how crowded a niche is with affiliate marketers is to do a little research. Pretend you are a customer searching for a particular product to buy. Type the search words into the search box and see how many affiliate sites pop up in the results.

Try various searches for products and services that relate to your niche. This is the best way to determine just how crowded with affiliates a niche really is.

You're not looking for a niche where you will be the *only* affiliate marketer. If other affiliates aren't selling in a niche, then the market isn't viable. You want to find a niche that has some affiliate marketers, but not one that has hundreds of thousands of them.

And most important of all:

7. Choose a niche that fills a need.

An old business adage says the key to a successful business is to "find a need and fill it." That's good, sage advice that businesspeople have lived by for generations simply because it makes perfect sense. There's no way I can improve upon that advice.

Conclusion

Affiliate marketing is a wide-open opportunity for those who are willing to work at it. A great many affiliate marketers make a "way-better-than-okay" living from affiliate marketing. There are also a whole lot more "I-tried-it-once-and-failed" affiliate marketers who have fallen by the way-side.

If anybody tells you that you can start your affiliate marketing business today and start getting paid by Friday, they are lying to you. Making an affiliate marketing business into a profitable business takes time, and a lot of the potential for your success rests upon you making the right choice of your first niche. Choose wisely! Choose well!

Try various searches for products and services that relate to your niche. This is the best way to determine just how crowded with affiliates a niche really is.

About the Author

Kathy Jackson is a Texas rancher and a contributing author for several farm and ranch publications. She is also an experienced freelance writer of email newsletters, review copy, educational materials, and blog posts on a wide variety of topics, including many aspects of online business and affiliate marketing. Internet marketing is one of Kathy's burning interests. You can read some of Kathy's articles on the Affiliate Classroom Blog at <http://blog.affiliateclassroom.com>. She can be contacted via email at jacksokathy@gmail.com.

Essential Tools And Skills for Aspiring Affiliate Marketers

By Mark Thompson
<http://www.income-academy.com>



Success in affiliate marketing doesn't take a lot of money or expensive tools. In fact, it is possible to get started at no monetary cost if you have some of the skills required.

Recently at a party, someone asked me what I did for a living. When I replied that I am an affiliate marketer, they replied that there was no skill involved in affiliate marketing, just luck.

I just smiled at their comments, as I long ago discovered that the harder I worked, the luckier I got. It seemed quite obvious to me that the person who made those comments had tried Internet marketing in the past and had probably failed.

Success in affiliate marketing doesn't take a lot of money or expensive tools. In fact, it is possible to get started at no monetary cost if you have some of the skills required. I am sure you'll find that not many businesses have such low entry costs and potentially such high rewards.

There are, however, several skills you will need to be successful, and the faster you master these skills, the more quickly your income will grow. As with most businesses, there are plenty of tools available that can speed up the process. Luckily for the budding affiliate marketer, many of the tasks for which these tools were made can also be achieved by using free resources and free tools.

Let's now look at what I consider to be the essential skills and tools an affiliate marketer needs to master.

Niche Selection

Niche selection is probably the most important aspect of affiliate marketing. Ideally, we are looking to find a niche that has as little competition as possible and as many customers as possible. Niches are like living organisms that are constantly changing and evolving. I have no hard facts, but I suspect that hundreds of new niches emerge every month.

The big mistake that people make when they first start out is targeting too big a niche — for example, "weight loss." What you should be doing is looking for much smaller niches, such as the "South Beach diet." Or, even better would be to look at what the latest trends are in weight loss and find a relatively new niche within the large niche. I've often found the smaller and newer a niche is, the more money I earn.

My best ever niche, which still earns me many thousands of dollars a year, is a single product in a large market. I was "lucky" enough to have

several sites about this product when it got lots of positive media coverage.

When I say I was lucky, I am being a bit sarcastic. I know this niche like the back of my hand, thanks to my having subscribed to trade magazines and suppliers newsletters. I knew from studying the company that they often ran big marketing campaigns that included giving free products to celebrities just before the campaign launched. All the signs were there that a new launch was coming, so within five minutes of the first press release, I was updating the sites I had in place. When the rush came in, I held 7 of the top 10 listings in Google.

Was it really luck? You decide!

To sum up, look for niches that are new or underexposed. Study the news and magazines, and see what's coming soon. Magazines often review products 3–4 months before the launch or talk about a new product line that a celebrity is working on. Imagine how much you could earn if you were one of the first people to set up a site about Oprah's new line of clothes for Hamsters!

Keyword Research

Closely related to niche selection is keyword selection. Once you know the niche you want to target, you need to find the words that potential customers are using to find information via the search engines. Taking the weight loss example from above, there would be no point in you targeting the keyword "weight loss"; there is far too much competition already. You should be looking for what's called long-tail keywords, such as "how to lose weight with the south beach diet" or "does the atkins diet work."

An excellent free tool that is available from Google will help you to locate keywords that will be useful to target, it's called the Google External Keyword Tool; a quick search of Google for "Google external keyword tool" will find it for you. Originally created to help people who placed AdWords ads to see what people were searching for, the tool works great for finding keywords for us to target.

The key to finding the right keywords are to find ones with a good number of monthly searches and low competition. You can find the competition by searching for the keyword in Google and checking the number of results. Make sure you add quotation marks around the term before searching — i.e., "Oprahs Hamster clothes"

You'll often find people will recommend that you look for keywords that have more than 500 searches per month and fewer than 1,000 competing pages. I disagree with this approach.

Everyone promotes their sites differently. If you are someone who promotes your sites a lot, then you may find that you can target keywords that have 100,000 competing pages and get to #1 easily. By limiting yourself to a set of parameters, you will miss out on several profitable niches. I would advise testing and seeing what works for you.

When deciding what type of site you want to build, you need to take into account your skills. If you are good at HTML, then you may want to build a HTML-based website. On the other hand, if your HTML skills are limited, a blog will likely be the platform for you.

It's important not to make your site look too commercial, so be sure to balance the content with the amount of ads and links you include. This will reward the reader with a better experience, and in turn, Google will rank your site higher.

Site Building

Site building is the enjoyable bit for most people; but before you start, you need to decide what platform you will build on. This usually comes down to a choice between a blog and an HTML site. When deciding what type of site you want to build, you need to take into account your skills. If you are good at HTML, then you may want to build a HTML-based website. On the other hand, if your HTML skills are limited, a blog will likely be the platform for you.

Blog publishing tools such as Blogger or WordPress are easy to set up and to maintain. If you can afford it, it usually pays off to buy a domain and install the self-hosted version of WordPress on it. By hosting your own blog, you aren't reliant on other companies' sites. Nothing would be worse than having a site that earns you \$2,000 a month being taken offline.

Monetization

The monetization process is relatively simple once you've done it for the first time. Monetization encompasses all the methods you include on your site that are likely to earn you money. For affiliate sites, you can add banners, large graphic ads, hyperlinked keywords, and product reviews.

Most good affiliate programs will provide you with various promotional tools that you can use. It's important not to make your site look too commercial, so be sure to balance the content with the amount of ads and links you include. This will reward the reader with a better experience, and in turn, Google will rank your site higher.

Site Promotion

The final skill you'll need to master, site promotion, is one of the most important. The better your promotion, the more visitors you'll get, and the more money you'll make; it's as simple as that. There are two main types of promotion you can use, both of which are effective in their own ways: article marketing and pay-per-click (PPC) advertising.

Article marketing is more labor intensive than PPC, but cheaper in the long term. Getting a good return from paid advertising is one of the most difficult skills to master. Many people think they can just create ads and make money; unfortunately, they soon find that this is not the case, and they end up losing a lot of money.

If you decide to do PPC advertising, the first tool you should buy is one that tracks which of your campaigns and keywords are successful. Once you can remove unprofitable keywords and campaigns, your profits will increase, and you'll be able to invest in newer, more profitable campaigns.

Article writing requires its own set of skills. Thankfully, mistakes you make when you first start out won't be as costly as PPC mistakes. Each article should target a related niche keyword and give the reader just

enough information to make them want to go to your website for more information. At the same time, it should target the people who have already decided to buy, not those who are just considering or researching a purchase.

When you master all the skills required, you will be able to create successful sites on a regular basis and make a good income from affiliate marketing. Just don't expect it to happen overnight. Continue improving your skill-set and investing in useful tools when they are truly needed. Then you really can earn more than you thought was possible.

About the Author

Mark Thompson spent many years working in an IT consultancy in London. Following a re-evaluation of his goals and lifestyle in 2004, he sold everything he couldn't fit into the family car and moved to rural Spain, where he now pursues a variety of online ventures. Visit his website <http://www.income-academy.com> to learn more about the benefits of his low-cost online business coaching.

**When doing
article
marketing,
each article you
write should
target the
people who
have already
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not those who
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