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Reference on the Web: Help for Small Business

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Thanks in part to the recession, there has been a growing trend in small business start-ups. Drastic layoffs in major industries have led to a resurgence of individuals looking to start and build their own businesses, many for the first time. Included in this listing are some of the more popular free Web sites designed to help the novice entrepreneur navigate the world of self-employment. All sites were last accessed May 21, 2010.

Allbusiness. www.allbusiness.com.

Sponsored by Dun & Bradstreet, this Web site is a vast library of articles, videos, podcasts, and blogs that provide timely information for the small business owner. Among the topics that are covered are starting and running a business, green business, franchises, and business taxes. There is also a Finance Resource Center.

Business.gov. www.business.gov.

The official site of the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) helps small businesses understand their legal requirements and locate government services from federal, state, and local agencies. There are online government forms to assist the novice entrepreneur with each stage of the business start-up as well as tools to register and obtain licenses and permits.

Entrepreneur. www.entrepreneur.com/bizstartups/index.html.

Maintained by *Entrepreneur* magazine, this Web site is neat and well laid out, as any business office should be. The Starting a Business section offers how-to guides, free sample business plans, success stories, and more. Entrepreneur Connect is a networking tool that provides the opportunity to promote products and services. Entrepreneur Assist is a collection of free business-planning and productivity tools. The Home Based Biz and Online Business sections are also worth checking out.

Franchising.com. www.franchising.com.

Franchising is often regarded as a safer alternative when compared to the financial risks and high failure rate typically associated with business start-ups. Franchising.com is a gold mine of franchising opportunities sorted alphabetically or by industry, location, high-investment, low-cost, home-based, women-based, ecofriendly, and many other categories. (The Federal Trade Commission's Guide to Buying a Franchise, found at Business.gov, provides an objective guide on the pros and cons of buying a franchise.)

Inventor Resources: U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.
www.uspto.gov/inventors/index.jsp.

This is the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office's official site for independent inventors. It provides comprehensive information on intellectual property, patents, trademarks, and copyrights. Also included is an extensive FAQ section.

Inventor's Handbook: Lemelson-MIT Program.
web.mit.edu/invent/h-main.html.

The protection of intellectual property can play an important role in small business if the owner is looking to trademark the business name and logo or if the business is based on an invention or original works. This Web site is a handbook created by the Lemelson-MIT Program to address the independent inventor's and aspiring entrepreneur's most frequently asked questions regarding U.S. patents.

SBA: U.S. Small Business Administration.
www.sba.gov.

The U.S. SBA was created in 1953 as an independent agency of the federal government to aid, counsel, assist, and protect the interests of small business concerns. The Small Business Planner and Tools categories have information and resources that address every stage of the business life cycle. The site also offers financial, disaster, and counseling assistance as well as other services. Most helpful is the link to local resources that helps identify SBA district and regional offices and Small Business Development Centers at the state level.

SBIR.gov: Small Business Innovation Research.
www.sbir.gov.

This site is administered by the U.S. National Science Foundation on behalf of the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) Office of Technology. As part of the federal government's research and development efforts, the information is targeted toward the nation's small, high-tech, innovative businesses. Included are solicitations from different government agencies, government-sponsored SBIR events, and other federal and state resources.

SCORE: Service Corps of Retired Executives.
www.score.org/index.html.

Known as the "Counselors to America's Small Business," SCORE is a national association dedicated to helping small business owners form and develop their businesses. SCORE has 364 chapters in the U.S. and U.S. territories and is a partner of the U.S. SBA. This Web site provides online mentoring and training in the form of e-mail and online workshops. It also helps with locating a local SCORE office for in-person mentoring.

Small Business Grants: Business.gov.
www.business.gov/finance/financing/grants/.

With the exception of noncommercial organizations, the federal government does not provide grants for business start-ups. This site is a good reference source for procuring grant money from state and local programs as well as private organizations. It also provides sources of low-interest loans and venture-capital financing from commercial lenders via federal and state government agencies.

Stopfakes.gov. www.stopfakes.gov.

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce Patent and Trademark Office, intellectual property-based businesses and entrepreneurs drive more economic growth in the U.S. than any other single sector. Unfortunately, this has captured the attention of pirates and organized crime. This site is part of a nationwide effort dedicated to protecting the intellectual property interests of small businesses from theft that can occur both at home and abroad. Of particular interest is the FAQ section, which helps small businesses, home-based businesses, inventors, and entrepreneurs decide when, where, and how to file for intellectual property protection.

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