*R*ecent statistics show that over 50% of South African consumers shop over the Internet. This finding makes a compelling case for why aspirant entrepreneurs should take their ventures online.

If you're still not convinced, perhaps the idea of reduced start-up and operational costs, coupled with a platform that allows you to engage with your consumers, will persuade you.

THE BENEFITS
Rihana Hoosain, Head of Products at M-Web, says taking your business online exposes you to untapped markets and offers invaluable potential for growth.

Rihana Hoosain

"An online presence or virtual retail store allows your business to operate in a space of immediacy, which provides your customers with speedy service. In order for a business to be competitive today, it must offer its customers instantaneous solutions," Hoosain says.

Kerrin Black

This was one of the factors that motivated Kerrin Black's decision in 2005 to establish Talent Finders (www.talentfinders.com) – an online-based centralised platform that connects amateur and professional talent with talent-seekers.

"Digital is the way business is going these days and I recognised the far-reaching potential of online and mobile platforms. For my business, it was a no-brainer because profiles and other information can be updated often and it's more accessible to people looking for talent, as well as those trying to market themselves. Also, I can operate anywhere – I don't have to rent office space or incur huge telephone bills from staff members," Black says.

Hoosain adds that going online means you're not saddled with expensive hardware, while affordable Internet connectivity, hosting services and software packages are reducing start-up costs.

"Without the need for a physical presence, you're still open for business 24/7, giving your customers the freedom to purchase at their leisure. Making minor updates or changes to your web page is cheap and easy, so you can react quickly when necessary," she says.

THE CHALLENGES
While ecommerce is on the rise, payment gateway options in SA haven't grown at the same rate, which has presented challenges to many business-owners.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

● Your site needs to be functional and easy to navigate. Too many people make the mistake of overlooking simple things like good design and usability. Gimmicks, unnecessary complications and excessive features can be tedious to navigate and work to your detriment.

● Make sure your product's suitable for online business. Fresh produce or items that spoil easily in transit aren't the best choice. Also, don't rule out the tangibility factor: customers like to touch and explore certain products before purchasing them, like TVs and audio systems.

"At the moment we don't have a one-stop solution where you can set up your website and payment procedure, but it's something M-Web's working on," says Hoosain.

Finding the right IT partner can also be detrimental if you don't get it right, Black says. In eight years she's had three different IT partners who she says "slowed down" the growth of the business.

"When you partner with people, you need to have agreements, timelines and guidelines for deliverables and know who you're working with," she cautions.

SAFEGUARDING YOUR ONLINE BUSINESS
The greatest risk to taking your business online is the exposure to cyber-crime, so ensuring you have adequate systems in place to protect customers from fraud is imperative.

"Online banking is the area in which your business is most vulnerable," says Hoosain. "Make sure you install security software and update it regularly. Also, never neglect software updates, as these will help prevent security threats."

Another trick to ensuring your business's safety online is protecting your network with strong passwords – they should have at least eight characters and include both letters and numbers.

MOBILE REVOLUTION
With over 12 million smartphone devices being utilised in SA, Hoosain says mobile platforms are what business owners should be focusing on for accelerated growth.

"No online strategy can stand on its own without a mobile element. Be sure that your website accommodates smartphones and explore the idea of apps. More and more businesses are also starting to gamify products and services [ie utilising game design techniques and mechanics] to make their offerings more interesting and visually engaging," she advises.

"An online presence or virtual retail store allows your business to operate in a space of immediacy, which provides your customers with speedy service. In order for a business to be competitive today, it must offer its customers instantaneous solutions," Hoosain says.