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## Va. Tech students craft online biz guide

It's aimed at entrepreneurs who want to launch an Internet business.

By [Jenny Kincaid Boone](#)

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A small publication has sparked interest from Dell and an endorsement from Nielsen Co.'s chairman and CEO.

Groups of business-minded Virginia Tech students have created a window into the changing world of online commerce. It's called The Online Business Guidebook, and it's aimed at entrepreneurs who want to launch an Internet business.

Led by a business information technology professor who formerly taught at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business, nine Virginia Tech seniors set out last year to craft a guide to starting an online business.

Virginia Tech assistant professor Alan Abrahams suggested the project to students in his senior business information technology capstone class.

Abrahams dreaded the tedious job of updating his course notes each year with the newest technology vendor information, a task that he took on while at Wharton and at Virginia Tech. It's too difficult to keep up with changes in technology, he said.

He won't be doing that anymore. The new online business guidebook will be produced twice a year with revised content by Abrahams' fall and spring semester students and some from other majors, including communications and economics.

Abrahams organized students into teams, giving them 100 categories to research for the book. The categories include ways to create online surveys, track competitors and design a company logo.

The book is organized by chapter, with step-by-step guides to Internet tasks, topics and vendor ideas. It also includes tips on how to use Google to find additional resources.

The students also are in the process of forming a nonprofit organization to run the guidebook. Eventually, they expect to funnel the surplus funds from printing costs to the Virginia Tech Foundation.

They published the guidebook's trial edition earlier this month with 1,060 copies. The book is only 74 pages. Though the students have enough content for a 140-page book, they don't yet have the money to cover printing costs for the full edition. They received more than \$10,000 in funding, but \$5,000 was used for printing costs.

For now, they're distributing free copies to community groups that cater to entrepreneurs, such as the Virginia Cooperative Extension for its Entrepreneur Express, daylong workshops held across the state.

The online guidebook will be a much-needed resource for people who attend these workshops, said

Scott Tate, a community viability specialist at cooperative extension's office in Abingdon. There are not many comprehensive resources for people launching an Internet business, he said.

Online businesses "are a growing entrepreneur segment," Tate said. "This is a good resource to actually hand to people."

Next month, Damon Silva, a Virginia Tech student and director of The Online Business Guidebook, will travel to Boston to recruit more sponsors at the Internet Retailers Conference and Exposition. Landing sponsors for the book has been a challenge.

"You get rejected so many times," said Silva, a Yorktown resident, who was part of the team that contacted potential sponsors last year by cold-calling them.

"Honestly I kind of went into it with a little fear of talking with these big companies," Silva said. "I definitely have gotten over it."

Eventually, they plan to send copies of the books to business schools and small business development centers in various states.

For now, you can purchase the guidebook at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) for \$9.95. It also has a Kindle edition.

There's one place you won't find the online business guidebook. It's not online yet.

In the next few months, the full 140-page edition should be available in pdf form on its Web site, [www.businessguidebook.org](http://www.businessguidebook.org).

Still, it won't be free to everyone. Business development groups or agencies will be able to download the book and print it for free.

Anyone else will have to pay, Abrahams said.

"We want to make sure that folks who are downloading it are actually small business owners interested in starting a small business," he said. "If they pay for it, most likely they are in our target market."

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