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Very fine online

Can you earn a living from an online business in France? **Frances Marcellin** speaks to three English expats whose websites allow them to pursue their passions

When weighing up the pros and cons of a permanent relocation to your dream mauve-shuttered farmhouse in Provence, what prevents the leap into the unknown? For many who are below retirement age, the uncertainty of how to make a decent living is a deal breaker.

With unemployment in France at an all-time high and the economy's struggles often hitting the news headlines, it's all too easy for naysayers to knock such ambitious ideas, and for your inner voice to quash such frivolous nonsense.

Yet small business ownership is the lifeblood of the English-speaking expat community and hundreds of expats make a living through working for themselves.

Recipe for success

With the word 'entrepreneur' being invented by the French (from *entreprendre*, meaning to undertake), it is unsurprising that over half a million new businesses were launched in 2013. This is partly thanks to the simplicity of the *auto-entrepreneur* regime which allows anyone to work for themselves with minimal red tape and taxation.

While many expats choose to run businesses that depend on local clientele, the wide availability of fast broadband connections means that running an online business is becoming more of a viable option.

An online business can operate in English, has a global customer base and it can be managed from a home office, facilitating that desire for a more flexible working day combined with a new, more laid-back lifestyle in France. Here are three examples to inspire you.

Mother tongue

Blackhen Education, an online France-based business provides English education to students online, as well as English IGCSE courses. It was founded by Sue Aitken in 2010 and helps children, aged seven to 16, to achieve a high level of English.

Being online means that it isn't just France- or Europe-based pupils that use Blackhen's services. Students in countries as far flung as Mauritius, Morocco and Egypt have used its services. "We have found that the demand for online lessons is growing, especially for parents who do not have access to one-on-one lessons for their children," says Sue.

Originally from Chichester in West Sussex, Sue had wanted to live in France since she was a child and once her own children were old enough to live independently in the UK, she decided to pursue her dream and moved to Charente-Maritime.

She had worked in education for 20 years in the UK as a head of department in various schools and as an A-level examiner for Edexcel. After running a drama workshop for English-speaking children, and hearing parents say their children were losing the ability to read and write English, she started teaching privately, but it wasn't long before she started to have other ideas about how to best tailor her education expertise and her entrepreneurial ambitions.

"I soon realised that as a business, this would be limited as there are only so many children you can reach on either a Wednesday afternoon or Saturday morning," says

Sue. "I was also interested in reaching children all over France – and, in addition to this, there was the desire to use my professional and creative skills to create a business."

Blackhen Education was born, but it wasn't until last year that Sue really felt the company had transformed from start-up into a fully fledged successful business. "This was mainly due to the intrepid steps into the social media world," she says. "We were then able to reach students further afield."

One of the key reasons for Blackhen Education's success is Sue's belief that English children living in France can achieve the same level of English as their British peers in the UK. "As long as the family are keen and motivated to put the work in, then I believe it is very possible. They are not learning English as a second language, they are maintaining their mother tongue."

While Sue is enjoying the company's success, she says that some of the stories about French bureaucracy are true. "You have to have patience, determination and a 'gritted teeth' attitude," she says.

But now the business is thriving, Sue can

concentrate on the things she loves the most about running Blackhen: being her own boss, the charities the company supports, and getting the children's work back.

"I still smile when I get the work through via email or the post," she says, "especially when it's from the little ones."

blackheneducation.com



Sue Aitken provides online English lessons



Janine Marsh enjoys the good life in northern France

French celebrations

Meeting people through her website is one of journalist and travel writer Janine Marsh's favourite aspects of running her online business. The Good Life France oozes *bonheur* and celebrates all that is joyful and fascinating about France through articles that Janine and her team of writers produce.

The site is usually visited by around 600,000 monthly visitors, but at the beginning of September 2014 it received 600,000 visitors during just one week. "Many of the writers are fellow journalists and travel writers who love to share their writing; others are passionate bloggers or authors," she says. "I like to have this mix-up of styles and topics – it makes for a dynamic site and gives readers a rounded view of France."

Janine never expected to move to France. Her house purchase in the beautiful countryside of Seven Valleys, in Pas-de-Calais, happened through a spur-of-the-moment house viewing in 2004. It was love at first sight and so she swapped her city life and London's financial world for a slice of rural France with her husband, cats, dogs, chickens, geese and ducks.

Originally, she set up the website to keep in touch with friends and family but before long she was reaching 60,000 people a month, and so she decided to invest more of her time in

the website.

"Making an income from a website is not easy," she says, adding that she belongs to the British Guild of Travel Writers and still works as a freelance travel writer (her home is a "three-hour comfy commute" to London).

"Anyone who wants to start a website to earn a living from it will have to work very hard – getting noticed takes time and a lot of effort," she explains.

Having worked as a journalist in print, it was difficult for her to get to grips with how the internet works. From uploading photos to optimising articles through SEO, everything had to be learned from scratch.

Until now Janine hasn't had a budget to pay writers or advertise, but she is starting to see a time when that would be possible. With the traffic that she gets, the main source of income through the site is advertising,

but she also has a business directory that lists English-speaking businesses in France.

"It's been a big learning curve for me, finding out what works, what doesn't work, what readers like or don't like," she says. "Writing for the web is quite different from print so you have to adapt. But whatever I write or publish my aim is always to inspire, entertain and inform."

thegoodlifefrance.com

An online business can operate in English, has a global customer base and can be managed from a home office, facilitating a more flexible working day

Get into estate

Successful businesses are focused on meeting customers' needs, and buyer's agent Home Hunts does just that, providing a personalised search service for clients and supporting them through the entire buying process. The team also help clients with their decision making (such as finding the best schools or a reliable tax adviser) long after the *acte de vente* has been signed.

After a meeting of minds back in 2004, Home Hunts was founded by Tim Swannie and François-Xavier de Vial. At the time, Normandy-born François was representing a UK-based property agent in Provence and on the Côte d'Azur following an 18-year career in the global tobacco industry.

Tim, originally from Harrogate in the UK, had worked in the property industry for years, but he had emigrated to the French Riviera in 2003 after visiting a friend in Mougins. "I initially came for a summer holiday but 11 years later I'm still here – the way of life here is hard to beat," says Tim.

Both François and Tim wanted to set up a estate agency that worked for the buyer, and although they had different backgrounds and skills, they shared the same mentality and vision. They set up a limited company in 2004, and then applied for their *carte professionnelle*. "This took more than six months to get as we had to provide a lot of information," says Tim. "The property industry is heavily regulated in France, which is good for buyers because they are very well protected."

Once fully registered they introduced themselves to all the agents on the Riviera to build up their network. "Then we started our marketing campaign, visited shows in the UK and began attracting clients," says Tim.

They set up a website which displayed all the properties of their partner agents, along with details and photographs. But after the first year, they decided to focus the business on the higher end of the market, offering properties that start at €1m.

That decision to specialise paid off because today the website attracts around 350,000 hits each month, and Home Hunts has grown into a network of more than 30 multilingual consultants across France, Monaco, Switzerland, London, New York and Miami.

In recognition of this growth, for the last two years running, Home Hunts has been recognised at the International Property Awards in both the best French estate agency and best website categories.

"Setting up a business in France is definitely challenging, but we've learned a lot over the years," says Tim. "The whole idea behind Home Hunts has always been to make the experience of buying a property in France as straightforward as possible."

home-hunts.com



François-Xavier de Vial and Tim Swannie at the International Property Awards