



Building an Effective Website

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How Can a Website Help Your Business?

Your small business can benefit greatly from having its own website. An effectively built site can play a key role in helping your company make an impact in the information age, and can enhance the effectiveness of your company's marketing and customer service.

Your website is the presence of your business on the Internet. It is important to understand how to properly develop a site that will effectively meet or exceed your business expectations. Your website may be relatively simple, providing visitors with a general overview of who you are and what you do, or it may be large and complex with online sales capabilities, a virtual catalogue, a virtual tour, and customer service functions. The possibilities are endless, so careful planning is required to develop the right website for your business.

The first step in creating an effective website is to consider the role that your site will play in your business strategy. Make sure your business goals are clearly identified before you start planning your site. Review your current business plan to see how and where a company website could strategically help your business grow and prosper.

Know Your Competition

When planning your business strategy, you need to research and understand your competition. The same basic rule applies to the development of your website. It is crucial to study your main competitors' websites to get a better understanding of how they use the Internet to promote their products and services and improve customer relationships.

It is quite easy to conduct a simple but effective competitive website audit. First, identify your competitors and find out if they have a website. When you have compiled a list of competitors that have a web presence, examine each site in detail. Approach each site as though you were a potential customer, noting what you like and don't like about their site. Pay particular attention to content (useful, current and relevant?) and design (easy to use, intuitive navigation, and professional?). Try to identify the four or five key tasks your competitors want their clients to accomplish online.

You can ask a few friends to evaluate your competitors' sites as well. Have them compile a similar list of what they found most useful (or useless) about your competitors' sites, and see if their impressions were similar to your own.

How and Who Will Use Your Website?

A critical aspect of building an effective website is knowing who will use your website and what key tasks they want to accomplish. Consider what you learned during the audit of your competitors' websites. Posing as a potential customer, were your needs or expectations met or exceeded through their websites? Did you find what you were looking for? Role-playing as a customer will help you identify the information and tasks that are most important to your clients.

Another effective strategy to determine the key tasks of your customers is to ask them directly. Take an informal survey of customers to find out how they would potentially use your website. Not only will you get valuable information about your audience, but it will show your clients that you are committed to finding way to serve them better.

Selecting the Right Developer

Website development is not as easy as it may appear. You are generally best to outsource the development of your website to a professional. A poorly designed, amateurish website can actually do more damage to your business than having no

website at all. You must carefully select the right web developer for your project – not all web developers are equal in qualifications and experience.

Create a List of Candidates

Get referrals from other business people who have websites of similar complexity to yours. Look in the business section of your telephone directory and create a list of website developers located in your area. Meet potential developers and request portfolio samples and client reference. Follow up with the references and ask questions about the quality and timeliness of the developer's work.

Narrow Down the List of Candidates

Review the portfolios and client references and create a short list of strong candidates. Contact these developers and ask them a series of questions, including:

- What makes you better than any other developer?
- What main software applications do you use when developing a website?
- How can you assure me that the site will be done on time and on budget?
- Can I view the development of my site in progress?
- What is your deposit fee (if any)?
- How much will the site updates cost after the site is complete?
- Have you worked on a similar project in my industry?

You should then request a web development proposal that includes a cost quote. A quality developer should be willing to meet in person to discuss your website strategy. Remember, you usually get what you pay for. A very low quote could mean the developer is unqualified to provide a quality end product, while an abnormally high quote may indicate that the developer believes you are willing to pay more than you need to.

A web development proposal should contain reasonable timelines and targets. It should also contain a communications protocol that ensures you will have direct input into the development of your website.

Choose Your Developer and Sign the Contract

There are some other important factors to first consider before signing a contract. Most developers will request an up-front project deposit. Reasonable deposits range from 15% to 50%. Do not pay for the entire project up front. As a client, it is also reasonable for you to demand a holdback (a contractual condition where you will hold back money until an agreed upon project milestone is met).

Carefully review the development contract, and have your lawyer review it if necessary. The development contract should include clauses that protect your rights to take legal action if your developer fails to fulfill his or her obligations. Make sure the contract gives you full ownership of all intellectual property related to your website, including content and any media or graphics. You may consider using an escrow service where a third party holds all of the intellectual property for the project, and releases the work once the contract has been paid in full.

Your contract should specify that all source files produced by the developer be backed up onto a CD-ROM and provided to you upon completion of the project. Also ask how much ongoing maintenance and updates to your site will cost.

The Key to Success: Planning

You will need to work with your website developer if your website is to be successful. Your developer may be an expert at website development, but you know your clients and business best. Planning is critical in developing a successful website. A good web plan documents your website's goals and objectives, describes the target audience, and includes an analysis of your competitors' websites. Just like your business goals, your website goals should be SMART – Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and include a Timeframe.

Your web plan should include your website's positioning strategy, key brand attributes, and a site map. A site map outlines the main sections of your website. A simple yet effective way to organize a site map is to write each individual content idea on a sticky note. Place each sticky note into a pre-identified website section

(for example, a company history or profiles of key people in your business would be placed within the “About Us” section). Try to limit your section categories to ten or fewer.

Your next step is to decide on a domain name for your business. Your business domain name should be short, memorable, and easy to spell. Register your own domain name. The only technical piece of information you’ll need is your web host’s domain name server (DNS) number. You should conduct a trademark search at a corporate registry office before registering your domain name, to ensure that you are not infringing on U.S. or Canadian copyright law.

You should also be aware of all legal and security issues related to your website. For example, you need to develop a privacy policy. If you are selling goods or services through your site, you will need to have a sales agreement that outlines the terms and conditions for the product purchase, including payment terms, interest, shipping, taxes, warranties, and customer support.

If your site is complex and handles sensitive client information, you may want to invest in a security audit. A security audit is a third-party evaluation of your site and your internal systems’ security. The goal is to establish reasonable safeguards to protect your systems and customer information.

What Should You Have on Your Website?

A website is of little use to anyone if it doesn’t have any content. The following are some common sections and pages that should be contained within your site:

- **About Us**

You should include a brief overview of your company, what you do, your key staff, and a brief history of your company (how many years in business).

- **Products and Services**

You need to tell people what you do and provide detailed information about each of your company's products or services (how to order, reasons to buy, client testimonials, etc.)

- **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)**

A well-developed FAQ page can provide answers to your clients' most common questions.

- **Customer Support**

You should tell visitors about your product and service support. It's also a good idea to provide contact information for support staff.

- **Contact Information**

Your customers have to be able to contact you. This section should contain all relevant contact information (company name, mailing address, phone, fax, e-mails).

- **Value-Added Content (News, Events, Resource Information, etc.)**

A regularly updated website can encourage visitors to return often. A common strategy is to include news articles that provide company and related industry information, or a free, valuable offer.

- **Site Map or Search Function**

You can include a site map that provides links to the major sections in your site. If your website is large, consider integrating a search function.

- **Privacy Policy and Legal Information**

Including and abiding by a good privacy policy in your site tells people you care about their privacy. You should also include any relevant legal or "terms of use" information in your site.

Top Mistakes in Website Development

Building a website isn't as easy as it looks! There are tens of thousands of websites that make common mistakes in content, layout, usability and clarity. Consider some of the most common errors made by developers.

The Boring Website

Your company website should be designed to interest or excite your viewers, not to bore them to tears. A website should pitch your company and its products and services clearly, without unnecessary "fluff" or overly detailed technical information.

The Misleading Website

As always, honesty is the best policy. Your site must accurately portray your company and its products and services. While it is important to sell yourself to potential customers, do not create a false impression through exaggeration.

The Cluttered Website

An uncluttered, clean site is not only visually attractive, but is also effective in making your sales pitch. Limit the amount of content on each page, and avoid overloading your pages with graphics. Your site navigation bar must be consistent – located either across the top, or along the side of your pages.

The Hard-to-Read Website

A common web design flaw is creating pages with text too small for the average reader to view without difficulty. Use an uncluttered sans-serif font (such as Arial or Verdana) with a minimum point size of at least 10 or higher. Black text on a white background is easiest to read. Coloured backgrounds with coloured text usually results in an unprofessional looking, illegible page.

The Slow Website

This is a common error by developers who overload their web pages with high-end multimedia that is only accessible to viewers with high-speed connections. Make your pages accessible to all viewers on any Internet connection.

The Useless Website

The useless website fails to provide the viewer with meaningful information about your company and its products and services. Websites that do not provide basic information, such as product descriptions, will often lead to a frustrating user experience.

The Scrolling Website

The scrolling website refers to improperly designed sites that require long vertical scroll bars, or even worse, horizontal scroll bars, to view the entire page. A website's horizontal dimensions should never exceed common computer screen widths (that width limit is currently around 740 pixels). A website that is too wide will result in a horizontal scroll bar on a viewer's browser, one of the worst design mistakes possible.

The Distracting Website

A sure sign of an amateurish website is the use of distracting graphics, or animated gifs. These pesky graphics usually add little value to the content of a web page. Other unnecessary elements include blinking text, silly icons like "top 5% visited site on the web", and hit counters.

The Reproducing Website

Many companies now provide software to fight reproducing websites. The reproducing site involuntarily opens up pop-up windows when a viewer browses to a certain page. Not only is this distracting, it can be very confusing and frustrating for the viewer.

The Rebel Website

Rebel websites serve less as a source of business information, but more as an outlet for designers to make a statement in an unconventional way. That they defy conventional standards means rebel websites are generally poor in terms of usability, clarity, and content.

The Unlawful Website

Beware of the use of any images or media without the permission of the copyright owner. You have nothing to gain by "borrowing" someone else's intellectual

property. Invest in custom photography or royalty-free images and media, which are relatively inexpensive and readily available.

After Your Website is Online

Website development is an ongoing process. While getting your site up and running is a major accomplishment, you must not lose sight of site maintenance, marketing and promotions, and monitoring site traffic.

It is a good idea to hire someone to oversee the maintenance of your site. Many developers charge a basic monthly maintenance fee to assist with the task of updating or changing content, adding or removing web pages, etc. If you are outsourcing the development of your site, request a maintenance quote that incorporates the fees for site maintenance (including hourly rates). In preparation for this quote, outline a list of pages or sections that you believe will need to be updated on a regular basis.

Once your site is online, implement a marketing strategy to generate traffic. Depending on your marketing budget, you may wish to advertise your site on the web or register it with Internet search engines and directories. It can be effective to advertise your site in trade related publications or associations (online and print). Integrate your website address into all company marketing publications – brochures, business cards, radio and television advertisements, and e-mail signatures.

Your site should also have the ability report the number of daily web visits and length an origin of each visit. There are a variety of free and pay-per-use web traffic tools available on the Internet.

Next Steps: Advanced Web Development

There are a variety of more advanced web developments and maintenance options that you may want to consider. Depending on the purpose and size of your site, there are instances where these advanced options are worthwhile.

Macromedia Flash

This is one of the most popular and widely used interactive multimedia formats on the Internet. Flash has a wide variety of applications – from interactive graphics to online games. Depending on the content of your site, you may wish to use it to demonstrate a product or service.

Content Management Systems (CMS)

Depending on how often you maintain or update your website, a content management system (CMS) can be a good investment. Most CMS tools come at a fairly high price. If your site requires frequent changes or updates, a CMS can automate the updating process, saving time and money. However, if your website is only updated occasionally, you probably don't need a content management system.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

There are a variety of companies on the market that offer "search engine optimization" and promise to improve your rankings in the major search engines. Before investing in these services, make sure you understand how your site will be optimized and how you will measure the success of the project. However, before committing resources to SEO, a good first step is to build a website with useful content. This will help Internet search engines properly categorize your website.

Multimedia Options

There may be instances where you may wish to include more advanced web features such as audio or video. Such media can be very effective for demonstrating a product, but you should approach advanced multimedia options with some caution. They can require a lot of bandwidth. Even with the advances in broadband technology, a sizable portion of the web surfing public still uses slow dial-up connections. Having bandwidth-intensive media may exclude those viewers from fully accessing the information on your website.

Resources

There are lots of resources and information available for anyone who wants to explore the subject of website development more fully. The local Saskatchewan E-Future Centre is a great place to start. Below are some other good resources:

- ABCs of Building a Website
www.webdevelopersjournal.com/columns/abcs_of_building_web_sites.html
- Accesible Web Page Design
www.makoa.org/web-design.htm
- Builder.com
www.builder.com
- CoolHomePages.com
www.coolhomepages.com
- HowThingsWork.com: Web Pages
<http://www.howstuffworks.com/web-page.htm>
- Web Page Design Flaws
www.amasci.com/mistake.html
- WebReference.comd
<http://webreference.com/authoring/design/>
- Web Style Guide
www.webstyleguide.com
- Usable Web
www.usableweb.com

- Uselt.com's Alertbox: Jakob Nielsen
www.useit.com/alertbox
- Usability Techniques: Checklist
www.stcsig.org/usability/topics/articles/he-checklist.html
- Web Developer's Virtual Library
<http://wdvl.internet.com/>
- Word Wide Web (W3C) Consortium
www.w3.org/

Contact Us

The Saskatchewan E-Future Centre, a service initiative of *business infSOURCE*, is your first stop for e-business information in Saskatchewan. We offer free, impartial, and easy-to-understand e-business advice and information for small and medium-sized businesses. Our goal is to help entrepreneurs make more informed decisions as they adapt to technological change. If you have any questions, we are only a visit, click or a call away!

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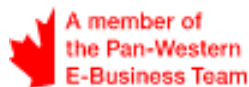
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