

Do I Need A Website? Where Do I Start?

When I talk to people who have a small business and they are not sure if they need a website, I ask them these questions:

- Do you have as many customers as your business can handle?
- Do you have no desire to grow your business larger?
- Are you certain that your customers will not use the Internet to find your product or service?

If you answer yes to these questions, then you are one of the few businesses that does not need a website and can stop reading this article. But for most small businesses, a website is a basic requirement of a marketing plan.

A website can help you reach one or more of the following goals:

- Help customers locate your business – your office, your storefront, and your phone number.
- Help persuade customers that you have the right service or product for them
- Help sell products online, even across different marketplaces, to retail customers or other businesses.

Where Do I Start?

I have seen so many small business spend thousands of dollars on designing a website but have not tied it into their business and marketing plan. Having a good design is important but if the website does not give your customer the information they want in a few short clicks of the mouse, then the customer is lost and/or going to your competition. Planning a website is key to creating a successful website that is both esthetically pleasing and easy to use.

1) Planning

Planning a website is probably the most overlooked part of creating a web site. I ask business owners these questions:

- What is the purpose of the website – to provide information, to promote your product and service, to provide customer service and support?
- What questions do your clients frequently ask?
- What information does your clients frequently request?
- What are you selling or marketing?

In other words, you have to determine what will your visitors need from visiting your site. Before a website can start selling your company to site visitors', **it has to answer their questions**. After you have determined the purpose of your website, the next step is looking at information flow.

Information Flow - Site Chart

Now that you have worked out why and what your clients will come to the web for, we need to create an information flow chart. The information flow or path is how you will get the site visitor to the information they need on your site. To create the Information flow or site chart, we need to:

- Identify the different groups of people who will use your site.
- Determine the goals of each of these groups. .

- Identify the information each of the groups needs to reach their goal and in what order.
- How they are going to get the information to reach their goal?
- Identify what might stop them from achieving their goal.
- Identify the information you will need to provide that will prevent the site visitor from leaving your site and going to your competition.
- Identify different functionalities you might have to provide site visitors such as searching, shopping cart, login accounts, etc.

From this, you should be able to create a list of website pages and have a rough idea of how you might group the pages together. You will also determine how visitors will navigate your site. The most fundamental rule of good website design is that a site must be clear and navigable for users; if it is difficult to negotiate your site, your users will leave for a site that they find easier to use.

2) Get Your Domain Name

The first thing you have to do is get a domain name. The domain name is how visitors will get to your website. You have to pay an annual fee for the right to use your domain name. Getting a domain name does not give you a website. It is just a name. It is the URL or how visitors will get to your site, so choose wisely.

3) Choose an Internet Server Provider (Web Host)

An Internet Service Provider (ISP) is a company that has many computers hooked up to the Internet. The ISP will host your domain name and your web pages. When you place your website on your ISP's computers, everyone can see/view the website.

There are many issues around finding a good ISP so do your homework. The type of web hosting package you will need to purchase from your ISP will be determined by the functionality of your website, which should have been determined during the web site planning stage.

3) Design Your Website

I have seen too many poorly designed websites created by people who have no graphic design experience because a business wanted to save money. Remember, your website is part of your marketing plan and should reflect your branding. For quite a few visitors, your web site will form their first impression of your company and you can only make one first impression! A website should look professional.

4) Test Your Website

Although this is done during the web design phase, I am mentioning it separately because it is important. Your website should be tested in different browsers because each brand of browser (Internet Explorer, Firefox, Opera, etc.) translates your web page documents differently.

5) Publish Your Website

Publishing your website includes putting the web page on the ISP's server so everyone can see them but it also entails getting the search engines to find your website and listing it. This is where a web design

professional is very helpful. Meta tags are used in the web page code to help search engines index your web pages. The better the meta tags, the higher your website is ranked in the search engines. Remember to use a variety of meta tags that reflect your business.

Also, remember to promote your website the old fashion way through business cards, brochures, advertising and word of mouth.

6) Update your website!

Just remember, if the information on your website is not answering the questions your site visitors have, they will stop coming. Update your website on a regular basis, not only for your potential customers but also for the search engines..

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