**Building Your Company Website**

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Once you have laid out all the aspects of your company's website, including the setting of internet objectives and strategies, you are ready to act on your content plan and implementation plan. It is time to start building the website. Because of the variety of services that most hosting companies provide, it is a good idea to select the hosting company early in the process. By doing so, you may be able to take advantage of their pre-packaged designs, design staff, and content creation tools.

**Finding a Website Hosting Company**

An important part of Internet marketing is finding a web hosting service that is an excellent fit for your business needs. An internet web host is a company that provides you with the server space and Internet connectivity you need to make your website available to the public. If you do not choose the right web host, you will pay dearly in terms of aggravation, lost revenue and, possibly, lost business credibility.

Although there are many free hosting services available on the Internet, if you're designing a website for business purposes, **never host your website with a free host**. Most free services are "free" because they clutter up your pages with advertisements designed to earn them money. In addition, most free services do not have the bandwidth, server capacity, or technology infrastructure to support your business adequately.

**Factors to Consider When Selecting Your Web Host**

The absolute essentials to consider when selecting your web host are:

* server space — the amount of space that your business will be allocated on the servers
* up-time — the amount of time that your page is accessible to the public
* bandwidth — the speed at which your pages load when your customers access them
* customer service — how responsive is the company to all of your requests

It is worth your time and effort to evaluate a number of companies to find the best match for your business.You want a web host that is capable of supporting your business needs as your business grows. (You can compare various hosting companies by going to [Hosting Review](http://hosting-review.com/) or [Top 10 Best Website Hosting.com](http://www.top10bestwebsitehosting.com/)) For example, you may initially decide that you will not offer online buying (e-commerce.) However, in a year, you realize that you are leaving a tremendous amount of money on the (cyber)table. Ideally, your web host will offer options to provide integrated e-commerce solutions. This is where spending time in the content and implementation planning phase will pay off. If you have a vision of where you would like the company to be in three to five years, you can make wiser choices at the outset. However, you don't want to overpay. It is unlikely your business will be the next Google or Facebook, so it is unlikely you will ever need to pay for that type of bandwidth or server space. Therefore, it's important to accurately assess your current and feature needs.

**How much server space do you need?**

Most business websites are not "space hogs." Pure text content takes up very little server space. If you are primarily providing text pages with limited interactivity, then 20 MBs of storage would be adequate. However, if you plan on incorporating an e-commerce or notification system that relies on databases, using the servers to host email, or if you plan on using a great deal of audio or video, then your space needs will be considerably higher. For example, one page of text from *Lord of the Rings* will take about 1 kilobyte of storage space; however, a video of how to tie a bow-tie could require 5 megabytes of storage. The web hosting companies or your developers should be able to help you estimate your server needs. Remember, to add in a "fudge factor" of 20 percent to 30 percent and to plan for future growth.

**Aim for One-hundred Percent Uptime**

Uptime refers to the amount of time that your business' web page is available to your customers. You should not consider any web hosting service that does not provide at least 99.5 percent uptime. Of course, it's easy to promise 99.9 percent uptime; it's extremely difficult for you to verify that is an accurate figure. Therefore, make sure you **do your research** and check out reviews of the different companies. And, make sure that you do with a provider that will back up their guarantee with refunds for downtime.

**"Unlimited" Bandwidth Means "Appropriate Usage"**

The term "bandwidth" is often used interchangeably with "file transfer." Both terms refer to amount of data that is downloaded (when a user views a page) or uploaded (when you add new content to your site). Many web hosting companies promise "unlimited" server storage and "unlimited" file transfers (bandwidth). And while "unlimited" may be closer to reality than "until death do us part," in a Hollywood marriage ceremony, both promises should be taken with more than one grain of salt. As you investigate web hosting companies, it is essential that you determine what they define as "unlimited" file transfers.

In nearly all cases, "unlimited" means "appropriate for a small business." This is a somewhat nebulous standard, but in all likelihood you will not run afoul of it. Where you may run into trouble is if you intend to have an extensive amount audio/visual content, rather than flat text. Discuss the details of your proposed site with the web host. And, **read the details** of your user agreement.

**Selecting a Quality Web Hosting Company**

You can't overestimate the importance of service when it comes to selecting your web hosting company. If your website is complex or an essential part of your company's day-to-day business, it's probably the most important factor to consider. The best way to determine the level of service that a web host company provides is to talk with other businesses that use its service. Web host companies should provide you with references of businesses that use their service and have similar needs to those of your company. It's important to call the references provided by the web host company.

**Tip**   
Ask the following questions of the references: How long have they been with the provider? How many unscheduled outages have they had with their provider? How timely are technical support issues dealt with? How accurate is the billing? What procedures are in place when dealing with customer service issues? How long do they have to wait on "hold" when they call for support?

Read the fine print. Specifically, read a web hosting company's Service Level Agreement (SLA) to see what they're actually guaranteeing. Does their SLA go beyond network availability? Do they provide a service level for responding to technical or customer support issues? Do they monitor and evaluate your websites availability? Do they support complex or specialized applications?

**Additional Factors to Consider**

Although storage space, uptime, bandwidth and customer service are non-negotiable essentials for any web host, your business needs may dictate that you consider only those companies with a wider range of features. Again, like any other business decision, additional features will require trade offs in terms of higher costs. One important consideration may be whether your are willing to pay for convenience of having a single provider meet all (or nearly all) of your internet marketing needs. For example, many web hosts will handle getting you your business domain name. The convenience of "one-stop shopping" may outweigh a slight additional cost.

The following are additional features or services you may want to consider:

* website builder templates (if you want to "do it yourself");
* access to web site developers (for a more custom look and enhanced functionality);
* Flash, Shockwave & Java support;
* your own domain name (www.yoursite.com)
* unlimited POP email accounts--name@yoursite.com
* unlimited email aliases
* email forwarding
* unlimited autoresponders
* access to SSL Encryption for secure transactions
* MySQL or SQL Server database
* htaccess password protection
* Server Side Includes (SSI) support
* unlimited free access to your server via FTP
* easy access to your log files
* web analytics (statistics on visits to your site)

Stability and experience are important when seeking a web host. Web hosting companies with a history of providing reliable service and a healthy client list should always be selected over less experienced hosting providers. Unlike inexperienced providers, experienced ISPs solve problems faster. They also cause fewer of them in the first place.

**Tips for Selecting the Right Website Developer**

If you have decided that you don't want to go with the standardized templates offered by your web hosting service, then you should consider hiring a professional website developer. Before committing to a developer, you want to be sure that the vendor can fulfill your objectives for the site, take care of your technology and marketing needs in the process, and maintain an adequate level of attention to your project.

How do you determine the best choice for building the website? The following steps provide some guidance.

* **Preliminary research.** Do preliminary research to develop a short list of three to five potential vendors. It should go without saying that you need to examine the web developer's own website.
* **Create a** [**request for proposal (RFP)**](https://www.bizfilings.com/toolkit/tools/tools-forms/internet-marketing-vendor-proposal-worksheet)**.** The most important determining factor in a successful web development project is a **clear statement of requirements.** Spend time thinking about your goals for your website, what it must do, and what you'd like for it to do. Turn these into clear statements for your RFP.
* **Get at least three estimates.** Submit your RFP to at least three vendors. Not only will this provide you with a choice of vendors, the responses to the RFP will help you better discern project-related issues and costs. Quite often, the vendor will have a list of questions related to the RFP that you will need to answer before the vendor responds. In fact, a lack of dialogue at this stage should be a red flag. It is critical to the estimating process that the vendor know exactly what you want. If your requirement is "build an online store" without more details, your prospective vendors should be asking for clarification. If they don't, you will pay dearly in time and money as you provide answers during the build phase.

Use a consistent process to evaluate potential web vendors. Consider using a checklist/scorecard that ranks vendors on important criteria.

* **Cost is only one factor in vendor selection.** Cutting corners in website design can result in a website that is less user-friendly—both in terms of function and appearance. The goal is to generate revenue from your internet strategy, whether indirectly via increased customer awareness or directly via ecommerce. An inferior website will mean leaving money on the table.
* **Put all requirements in writing.** Once you have made your final decision to award your project to a vendor, it is important that you both agree, in writing, to all aspects that make up the project. Often this document is called a Statement of Work (SOW). You should carefully review and raise any questions for clarification. Once all the terms are agreed upon and carefully documented, your web developer or designer should draw up a project agreement that details of all the services to be provided. The agreement should also include project-related expenses, such as hosting, training and ongoing site maintenance. If the vendor is creating unique functionality or content, the agreement should also specify copyright and software licensing restrictions.
* **Anticipate—but control—cost overruns.** It is the rare (very rare) technology project that does not cost more and take longer than originally esitmated. Understand this going in, but make sure that there is a change management process in place that holds both you and the vendor accountable. Often cost overruns are due to the fact the business owner keeps changing his or her mind about what the website should look like and what features it should have. If you don't spend the time carefully specifying what you want, then you will spend both time and money getting changes. Any changes to the budget and timeline must be justified and well documented.

**Warning**   
**Vendors who balk at the rigors of your selection process or requirements to provide a detailed project agreement are candidates to be avoided.** Experienced web developers and designers, on the other hand, are more likely to value your level of preparedness and organization. It will make their job easier and your project more successful.

***Good Web Developers Are Good Communicators***

The communication process should start before the contract is signed. During the RFP phase, a reliable and professional vendor will contact you before providing a proposal to ensure they have a clear understanding of the project, its goals, and project-related technologies. Based on these discussions, they can fine-tune the timeline, budget, and their proposed approach. Based on their experience, they offer processes for managing changes to the project scope and offer tools that make it easy for clients to provide feedback and monitor project status. In addition, a vendor who is experienced handling potential problems is more desirable than one who will convince you that nothing can go wrong and that all projects are completed on time.

**Develop a Basic Understanding of Website Design and Usability**

Your goal is to implement an effective website—one that appeals to users and generates revenue for your company. This means having a basic familiarity with good website design and usability standards. Usability guidelines are usually broken into categories, such as content, navigation, appearance, but all the standards have a common goal: happy and successful website users. For the small business, this translates into increased revenue and customer satisfaction.

Although the look and feel of many well-conceived websites may vary greatly, good websites tend to share a number of common characteristics. These characteristics provide the basis of the "Research-Based Web Design and Usability Guidelines" developed by the federal government as part of its usability.gov initiative. ([Download the guidelines here.](http://www.usability.gov/guidelines/guidelines_book.pdf)) The federal guidelines provide in-depth discussion of the wide range of web design issues you can encounter in developing a website. While the amount of material is daunting, usability.gov provides workable standards that you can incorporate into your design requirements.

**Tip**   
As of July 2011, two outstanding basic references were available on the [User Effect](http://www.usereffect.com/) website. The first, [Anatomy of a Usable Website](http://www.usereffect.com/topic/anatomy-of-a-usable-website), is a visual representation of design elements that every one should consider when designing a website. The second is a [Website Usability Checklist](http://www.usereffect.com/topic/25-point-website-usability-checklist) that highlights 25 essential factors that affect the user's experience on your website. Both documents can provide inspiration for what you want on your website and help the communication process between you and your developer.

**Make Your Website Accessible to the Disabled**

Although only government contractors must comply with [Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act](http://www.section508.gov/), as defined by the US Federal Access Board and guidelines defined by W3C/WAI, every website should strive to do so. The Section 508 standards are designed to ensure that those with vision impairments are still able to use the website effectively. Since these accessibility considerations comprise the most stringent guidelines for web developers, following them ensures the site is also compliant with other requirements, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 255 of the Telecom Act.

Put simply, a vision impaired individual should be able to get as much information from your website using a screen reader, which translates the content into automated audible output or refreshable Braille displays, as a sighted person can by reading the screen. Although there are sixteen separate standards that must be met, the first one sums the requirements up nicely: "a text equivalent for every non-text element shall be provided." This means that if your website includes a map of your delivery region, there should be a textual explanation of the area covered as well. In most cases, this explanation is provided in elements that are hidden from the sighted-viewer. A common example of this is the "alt" tag for HTML images.

Make sure your website development company understands 508 compliance before you hire them. This is especially important if you plan on doing business with the federal government, having a 508 compliant website may be required for your to get the contract.

**Address Three Critical Design/Usability Elements**

Ideally, you will be working with a skilled web developer who has been keeping up with the current usability and design trends. However, having some knowledge of best practices enables you to participate more effectively in the development process.

***Make a Good First Impression***

You should strive for a clean, consistent look-and-feel across all the pages in your website. Select a color scheme and style of buttons and labels and use that for every page. Elements that appear on multiple pages, such as "sign up for our email newsletter," should look the same and appear in the same location on each page.

Make the pages clean and uncluttered. This means that you limit the amount of content on a page. It also means that you minimize the use of emphasis, capitalization, and other "attention-getting" tactics, such as multiple colors of text and flashing text. Important information should be displayed immediately when the user lands on the page. The user should not have to scroll down or, worse yet, across the page to see important content.

***Don't Let the Reader Get Lost***

Site navigation is an extremely important aspect of web design. Make sure that the main navigation menus are easy to find and understand—and that they are clearly labeled. Make your links stand out and clearly label them. Always have a way for the user to get to your home page. It's standard practice to have your logo appear on each page and for it to be linked to your home page. And, provide a clickable "bread crumbs" trail or menu path at the top of each page of content. This enables the user to navigate from a specific page to a more general topic.

***Make the Content Easy to Read***

Nearly every usability expert agrees that all the cool design elements, zippy navigational aids, and cutting edge features are useless if the content on the website is mediocre and hard-to-read.

* **Make sure the text contrasts sharply from the background.** The government guidelines urge black text on a white background. If this seems too dull, consider this: people read black text on a white background faster than they read text in other schemes. Why does this matter? Website users don't read; they scan! In fact, many experts posit that only at 25 - 30 percent of your text gets read. If you combine that with a color scheme that makes reading difficult (or even impossible for those with vision impairments), you reduce the chance the user will convert to a customer. Still not convinced to stick with black & white? Then aim for a clear, uncluttered, light-colored background with dark, high contrast text.
* **Use large and familiar fonts.** Again, boring and familiar is good. While the jury is out on whether sans serif or serif fonts are more readable on the web, the verdict is in regarding "eccentric" or "unusual" fonts. People are less likely to read the information is the font is unfamiliar. Stick with Times New Roman or Georgia (if you like serif fonts) or Verdana, Helvetica or Arial (if you prefer the cleaner, more modern appearance of sans serif fonts). Whatever font you use, use a large type size: 12 points or larger.
* **Use clear, descriptive headings.** Remember, web readers don't read—they scan. Help them scan effectively by using short paragraphs organized under clear and descriptive headlines. A user should be able to scan quickly down the page and gather the key information or target the material they actually want to read.
* **Write concisely.** Use short sentences. Use active tense. While you should describe your products completely (and compellingly), keep the descriptions short and focused.

**Writing Content for the Web**

Good content attracts good traffic. On an average day, 77 percent of all American adults are on the Internet, according to December 2010 Pew Internet and American Life Project. Of those online, 78 percent will look for information on a service or a product; 83 percent will look for information on a hobby, interest, or medical concern. This means that if you've got good content on your site that can be found by [search engines](https://www.bizfilings.com/toolkit/research-topics/marketing/search-engine-optimization-can-drive-results), you'll have a natural advantage over competitors.

Good Internet articles attract and engage readers by understanding the dynamics of how internet users approach content. As mentioned earlier, Internet users aren't readers when they arrive on a web page. Instead of reading web page content immediately, site visitors typically conduct a quick scan of web page content to determine whether it's a "good hit." If it is, they'll continue reading. If not, they'll return to the search engine and look at the next result in their query.

Even in cases when individuals find page content interesting, it's estimated that 80 percent of site visitors will still only scan the content on a given web page for "highlights" and move on. As little as 15 percent of site visitors actually read the entire contents of a page. The trick for effective web-content is understanding the terms of engagement and capitalizing upon them. In addition to the suggestions given earlier under website design and useability, keep the following guidelines in mind when writing for the Internet.

* **Lead with a powerful statement.** Like a newspaper, online articles should begin with the most relevant information and end with the least relevant. The content within each heading should also follow this rule.
* **Create meaningful headings.** Content with headings is easier to scan. Use headings to organize content into readily identifiable sections. By facilitating the users natural inclination to scan the page, you will increase the probability that they will remain on the page long enough to move from a scanner to a reader to a customer.
* **Use bulleted lists.** Bulleted lists are an ideal way to summarize information for online visitors. If each bullet point requires lengthy conversation, add a link to a deeper discussion, rather than derail the scanning process of those who are not interested in that particular area.
* **Use tables and charts.** Many readers respond to visuals better than text. For these readers, a picture in the form of a chart is worth more than 1000 words. And they'll find tables a meaningful way to browse related data.
* **Keep your paragraphs short and focused.** Online prose is best expressed as "topical bursts." Limit each paragraph to a single topic or subtopic that contains no more than three or four sentences. Paragraphs that fill an entire screen are a signal to potential readers that reading your content will be more work that finding another resource.

In most instances, online writing should have a "conversational" tone. The best online writers, like the best journalists, use an open, natural and uncontrived writing style. They avoid techno-speak, buzzwords, and jargon—unless their content is intended only for individuals who understand the jargon.

Experienced online writers share experience, opinion, dissenting argument, perspective, and their sense of humor whenever it's appropriate.

**Your Website Requires Ongoing Maintenance**

The actual cost of your website included both the start-up costs and the continuing costs associated with maintaining it. Continuing costs include the monthly payments to your web hosting company and e-commerce providers, but it also includes the time and energy required to maintain the content. When you are designing your website, you need to consider how often the site will need to be updated and who will handle the updating. These ongoing costs affect your anticipated return on investment?

**Tip**   
If your site is developed by a vendor, you may want to include development of a maintenance plan within the scope of the project. You also need to be very clear is specifying when the "initial development" is concluded and "maintenance" begins.

You may also want to get bids on the cost of ongoing maintenance by the team that developed your website. Ongoing maintenance is nearly always a separate contract from the initial development contract.

As you design your website, you should prepare a written maintenance plan that will ensure that your site is up-to-date and is functioning properly. At a minimum, the plan should:

* **Identify ongoing tasks associated with the website.** The maintenance plan should identify daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly and annual tasks associated with maintaining and protecting web-related content. The number and nature of these tasks will vary depending upon your business needs. For example, a weekly task could be posting the week's special deals. A quarterly task might be changing the graphics on the website to reflect the changing seasons or verifying that all links are still working correctly.
* **Specify who will complete each task.** There should be a primary person and a back-up person assigned to each task. Make sure that the individuals who will do the task know what they need to do and when it must be done. In addition, make sure that they have all the necessary rights and permissions to do their tasks.
* **Quantify the anticipated costs of each task.** This will vary based upon the complexity of the task and how your website was designed and is hosted. A simple task, such as posting the weekly special deals, may be able to be handled by you or one of your regular employees. Changing the "look" of the site to reflect the changing seasons may require more technical expertise.

**Plan for Regular Website Enhancements**

Your website is part of integrated business and marketing plans that are designed to help your business grow and prosper. As such, it is essential that you keep your web presence in sync with your overall growth plans. This means that you need to plan to provide enhancements, such as adding additional content areas, branching out with new functionality (such as an online store) or embracing new opportunities, such as adding a "Like" button to your pages. Schedule reviews of your website as least annually and make sure that you stay on the cutting edge of technology.