Web Site Design for Business

Advice From the Professionals

Why Go Online

In this age of electronic communication, more and more consumers are turning to the internet to purchase products or services in the comfort and convenience of their own homes. Research suggests that there are well over 500 million people who access the internet world wide, and that 70% of consumers who browsed online in the UK alone, went on to make a purchase. As technology progresses, consumers feel more reassurance that online shopping is safe.

Does your competitor have one? As markets are constantly changing, keeping an eye on your competitor gives you an incite into industry specific market trends and can show you any offers they may be promoting. If your competitor has a website, so should you. If you don't, they could be taking potential business away from you.

International Markets: With your website up and running, your products or services can be accessed by anyone using an internet ready computer, from all over the globe, any time day or night. It's like having a shop or office in every town, in every country, all over the world.

Email - Fast and Efficient: There is no need to wait for the postman for that important document you have been waiting for and no more lost mail. Email can often be delivered in less than 15 seconds anywhere in the world.

Feedback: Knowing what your customers really want or what they are thinking about your company is very important information. By including feedback forms and surveys on your website you can gather valuable information which in turn could improve your organization.

Customers Expect Websites: Without a website your business runs the risk of never being found by potential customers. Also, a business without a website can seem to be less successful that a business that has an online presence.

The internet is a form of media that attracts more and more people everyday. As competition between website designers and web hosting company's increases and prices become more competitive, it makes sense to market your organization online.

Getting Started

Every small or home-based business should consider a website. There are certainly some businesses where a website offers nothing of value but for the vast majority a website can be a very effective sales channel and marketing tool. However, there are some "rules" to follow to ensure the success of your website. This article will list the steps we have taken that have resulted in a successful website.

The Basics: Decide if you are going to develop your own website or contract with a developer. If the latter, search the web for possible candidates. If you are doing it yourself, visit a bookstore or search the web and pick up one of the many excellent references on Web Publishing and html. If you don't have the time, hire someone and ensure they have the required expertise. A child can write html code. Designing an effective website takes an expert.

Carefully outline and organize the material you want to place on the web. Don't do it "on the fly." Decide on the "look" of your pages. Browse the web for ideas. Your website MUST provide a service as well as present your product or service that you are selling. In our case, we provide useful small business related information (tax advice, start-up and money saving tips, etc). We then gently steer the visitor to the books we are selling. It works!

Your website must be EASY to use. The design of the site must make it easy for the user to navigate and not get lost. A confused visitor will simply leave. Your website will go nowhere without a sustained marketing effort. See below for what has been successful for us.

First Impressions Are Everything

This may seem very basic, but if your site isn't pulling the traffic or generating the sales you would like it to, it just may not be the poor performance of classified ads, banner ads or a similar service. The real reason for lackluster sales could lie with your web site itself.

Telling someone their site has a lot of design problems is not a very popular stance, particularly if that someone just spent thousands of dollars to have it designed for them. Or, if they gave up their nights and weekends to write it themselves.

This is one of the reasons why tracking statistics software is essential to the health of a site. The site owner can track exactly what's happening with an ad campaign and see for him or herself what ads are working and how long someone stays at a page. If a page gets lots of hits, but no one stays more than a moment, chances are the page is suffering from the slow load blues and no amount of advertising will generate sales.

One of the most common errors of new web sited designers is what a new site owner wants most - lots of graphics. Big, beautiful, full color images; spinning graphics everywhere; animated images at every corner and on every line; jumping, bouncing, flashing, bubbling images next to every paragraph. Great fun, but the more images on a page and the larger the size of the file, the longer it will take to load. Try to remember not everyone out there has a 56k modem hooked up to their 400 MhZ, 164 MB RAM CPU.

Think content. A few images will spice up a page, and enable you to "hide" valuable keywords for search engine placement, but too many large image files will send your visitor surfing before they even know what a great product you have to offer.

A good rule of thumb: keep images under 12k and try to keep each page limited to 5 or less files. A page should load in 15 seconds or less with a 28.8k modem. Again, it's content, not cool, that will keep your visitors from moving on, and keep them coming back once they've found an interesting site.

Bottom line: think content; keep it simple; avoid too many images; avoid too many photos; keep animation simple - and limited. Don't talk your web designer into putting a lot of large image files on your pages. Then, and only then, plan your advertising campaign. And then, keep updating your site's content to make it dynamic, interactive and attractive to repeat visitors. If your site never changes, if your content is never updated, what's the incentive for a visitor (translate customer) to keep returning?

Site Usability

There are certain things that make a web page easy to navigate and still others that will chase away visitors. Below are some tips indicating elements that should be in place in every web page in your site.

Identification: Who are you? Why do you have a web page and why should they return or do business with you? These are questions that should be answered on your title page and perhaps included in some form in every page on your site. A simple way of contacting you should be in place. One example of this is an invitation at the bottom of each page, to email comments to you, with a link that activates the email portion of the browser.

CONTENT DESIGN: The download period is your most vulnerable time on your web page. Keep your index page simple. Make sure you have text enough in the top of the page to give the visitor something to read while your graphics are loading. Keep graphics to a minimum. Use short paragraphs and a lot of room for the eye to rest. A designer or advertiser calls this "White Space." "White Space" is VERY IMPORTANT. It can make or break any advertising space. Too little makes a document seem too busy. Make sure your text margins can float if your skill or HTML editor can manage it. Include graphics that are in harmony with the rest of the page and the message that you want to present. Make sure your background and your text can be seen by persons who are colorblind. AND, if you are colorblind make sure someone else who is not colorblind previews your work before uploading it.

Never place a white text on light background or dark text on a dark background. That is an immediate turnoff. It can make your visitor very irritated at the page designer. It may be just the thing to motivate them to look elsewhere for information and that elsewhere may not be on your site!

When making lists with graphical bullets (such as picture of a globe, a diamond or ball), if possible make them into radio buttons or links to the area in your web page that illustrates your point. When using graphics, remember that many people will click on a graphic for a description, or expansion of the information that picture represents. Some websites use this to their advantage to create pleasant surprises for their visitor. Some visitors search for those surprises. Perhaps you should consider providing those surprises.

The more often you change your web page, the more often a person may visit. There are services of which you may subscribe that informs the subscribers when a member site has changed.