

Launching a Website for your Small Business

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Here's how to develop a successful Internet presence without the dedicated web staff and financial resources of a large corporation.



SO YOU THINK YOU WANT A WEBSITE. BEFORE attempting to create a web presence for your business or consulting practice, you need to determine why you want a website and what you want it to accomplish. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Why do you need a website? Do you want to: expand your business' geographical reach; promote services or products in greater detail than is possible in print; showcase qualifications and talents; conduct e-commerce or e-business; and/or supplement or support offline marketing initiatives.

For every good reason, there is a bad one. The worst by far is "everyone else has one, I should, too." Don't fall into this trap. If you identify specific reasons why you should have a site, you and your site benefit.

- Do you already have a brand or identity that you can leverage? Don't underestimate or ignore the time, effort and cost that went into developing your existing image. If you have a well-known or recognized brand, build upon it.

- Who is your target market?

- What is your industry?

- Who are your competitors? Do they already have websites? If so, what do they look like and how do they succeed in accomplishing their goals? If they don't appear to, use that to your advantage.

- Are you selling a product or service? Do you have a catalog of products that change frequently that you wish to sell online? If so, will you accept credit cards over the Internet?

- Do you have content that changes frequently?

- How soon do you want your website to be operational?
- What would happen if you never create a website for your business?

Designing vs. building a website

Website creation involves two very different aspects — building vs. designing the site. Building a website is a highly technical process, and designing a website is a highly creative process. Unless you're willing to put the time and understanding into both, your site launch may not be successful.

Building a website is the arrangement of content in a logical way. It is the "form and function" aspect of site development. The substance and quality of the information, as well as making sure the navigation or path of the site follows an underlying rhythm, that all the links work, and that the site has a consistent presentation are all key components of building a website.

Designing a website is all about marketing. "Look and feel" is the term often used to describe the design aspects of a website. This is where you capture the personality of your business, services or products in a most flattering way.

Be careful to match your site's "sizzle" factor to the type of customer or industry you serve. Sites for children or gourmet food products would use very different design elements and technology than those of an engineering company or business information audience. If you already have an identity or brand, capitalize on the momentum that your offline efforts have already produced by bringing in and tying graphic elements, taglines, marketing data, etc. into your website.

Do it yourself or hire a web consultant?

If you have limited resources, need a simple site that is intended primarily to provide information, and are graphically challenged, an automated do-it-yourself website might work just fine for you. In addition to providing website space and e-mail services, many domain registration and hosting firms offer basic online site-building applications that can get you up and running quickly. Building a professional-looking site is usually a matter of choosing a design template, filling out a web-based questionnaire, and submitting the form. What could be simpler? However, be advised: you may not be able to create a site that accurately matches your existing visual identity or to go beyond the web host's established offerings.

If you're technically adept and have some creative ability, you can forego online site-building applications, purchase some web design and imaging software (e.g., Microsoft FrontPage, Macromedia Dream Weaver, Macromedia Fireworks, Adobe GoLive, and Adobe PhotoShop), and build your site from scratch. The aforementioned "gold standard" software can be rather expensive and may not be intuitive to most users. Building a website from the ground up does require a moderate degree of creativity and usability knowledge. If you build a site that's hard to use, is very slow because of poor image optimization, or doesn't project a professional image, it may turn people off.

Furthermore, the technical support included in your web hosting plan probably does not include anything beyond uptime or connectivity. So if you purchased or acquired site-development or imaging software, third-party scripts or services (e-Bay, PayPal, or Yahoo stores), or you need some additional expertise or advice on look and feel, you're pretty much on your own.

Alternatively, you can obtain web hosting *and* design services all in one place. When you work with a combined web design and hosting firm, you can take advantage of their technical expertise and Internet savvy. In addition to web hosting and e-mail service, they can deliver custom solutions to match your needs. Small companies in this business typically offer excellent responsiveness, quick turn-around with a high degree of accuracy, and personal attention, allowing you to focus on your business and leave the technical issues and maintenance of your site to a professional.

How to find a web consultant

Finding a web consultant is no different than finding any other type of consultant. Most business relationships, by far, develop as a result of referrals. Ask your colleagues who they have worked with.

Check out your customers', suppliers' and competitors' websites. Many sites include the name of the site designer and a link to his or her own website.

When you're looking to find a website design consultant, use the Internet with care. By specifying your locality when

doing searches, you're more likely to find an outfit that's close to your business' operation, which may be important if face-to-face meetings are required.

However, keep in mind that a Google or Yahoo search may not turn up the designers who can best meet your needs. As a small business, you are likely to benefit from working with another small business or independent consultant, who may or may not appear on the first few pages of the search results. The key is to not rely on the Internet to identify web designers, but rather to use it as part of the qualification process.

Qualifying a web design and hosting company

Once you have identified several potential web consultants, evaluate their experience. Has the web designer created websites for businesses similar to yours or that are similar to what you envision for your site? Do they have relevant industry experience? If you want to sell products through your website and accept credit card payments, does the web designer have experience with that?

Review the web designer's portfolio. A well-established designer will have a solid portfolio of websites that he or she has created for other clients. Ask for links to those sites and review each one. Do you like what you see? Do the sites have a style that appeals to you?

Ask for customer references. Contact the consultant's clients and ask them about their experience with the web design company. Were they happy with the results? Did they get what they paid for? How much did they pay and what was included in that fee? How long did it take to get the site up and running? Would they recommend the designer? How responsive was the company when they had questions? What didn't they like about the consultant?

Compare prices. Pricing for creating and hosting a website can vary (see sidebar). Typically, a web design consultant will charge one of three ways:

- *Time and materials.* The price is variable and is based on the actual number of hours spent working on your site.

- *Fixed price.* Some design consultants charge a fixed fee based on a fixed set of requirements. If you outline your requirements very carefully in a detailed Request for Proposals (RFP), the consultant will be able to quote you a single price.

- *Component pricing.* Some design consultants charge "by the page." This allows you to control the cost by designing a specific number of pages. However, beware — some design consultants will charge by the page but will have "special pricing" for components such as custom graphics, animated images, add-on functionality, and the like.

The most important step in pricing is to make sure the potential design consultant outlines all of the prices associated with the work and puts it all in writing. Never enter into a deal unless you understand all of the costs.

Also make sure that you understand what "done" means. Include the agreed-upon dates in your contract and provisions

for what will happen if these dates are not met. Solicit bids from several web designers and compare both the pricing models and the prices themselves.

In addition to the design and creation of your site, you need to find a hosting company that can serve the site to the public, register your domain name and handle your e-mail services. Ask potential web hosting consultants:

- Can you handle domain name registrations, transfers and renewals? Most consultants will prefer to handle this aspect from the start, or would require that you provide them with registration log-in data if you did this yourself.

- How many e-mail accounts come with each plan and what are the set-up fees for new accounts? Most plans specify the number of e-mails accounts upon sign-up. If you need more later, additional fees may apply.

- How much web hosting and e-mail space do I get and what are the charges for bandwidth use? In addition to the amount of storage space necessary for your content, there may be a limit on the amount of traffic your site incurs. If you need more storage space or you exceed bandwidth use, additional fees may apply.

- Does my plan include e-commerce and secure transfer of sensitive information (otherwise known as Secure Socket Layer [SSL])? Some types of information needs to be encrypted in transit. If you collect credit card information, this is a must. Most plans come with some sort of SSL, but they are usually not personalized. You'll need to order a third-party SSL certificate that matches your business name so customers can feel confident they're doing business with the right entity and that their information is protected.

- What is your uptime guarantee, and do you have a service level agreement? Most hosting firms offer 99% uptime (the amount of time your site will be available to viewers in the course of a year) and a guarantee (usually a rebate) if they can't provide continuous service. The Internet is not perfect, and many things are beyond their control. By offering fast Internet backbone connectivity and redundant backup, unless the hosting company is very small, expect a high level of service. Be aware that your Internet Service Provider (ISP, the firms that give you access to the Internet and e-mail) could be the source of spotty service, not your hosting company.

- What type of support is offered (phone, e-mail, both) and what is the average response time?

- What type of uploading or development tools do I need to add content to my site? If you're doing site development yourself, you can

either transfer your content to your site via FTP (e.g., FTP Explorer, WinFTP or Fetch) or use visual development tools (e.g., Microsoft's FrontPage or Visual Studio, Adobe's GoLive, or Macromedia's Dream Weaver) to send content to your site.

- What is the underlying technology of the server (Linux – PHP, Unix – Perl, Microsoft – ASP, Cold Fusion – CFM)?

- What databases do you support? If your website needs to display dynamic data, those data need to be stored in an online database, such as MySQL, Microsoft Access, Microsoft SQL Server, FoxPro, FileMakerPro, etc. Make sure your hosting company can provide support and database connectivity.

- Do you offer application development or third-party web design and maintenance services? If you will be conducting e-business or e-commerce, you need to utilize scripting services and database development. Ask your hosting service if they can provide such services or if they can outsource it to a reputable third party.

Fees and Pricing

Because of the highly competitive nature of web hosting, the profit margin is razor thin. Companies in this business rely solely on volume and value-added services, such as custom-designed sites, e-business and e-commerce applications, print collateral (e.g., brochures, direct mail, and corporate identity packages) as well as future strategic planning for the client's ongoing web presence.

For website development, it is customary to set a payment schedule that spans the life-cycle of the project, with the majority of the fee due upon project release (when the site "goes live"). Most contracts specify a cancellation fee to protect time spent on unaccepted deliverables.

Site Size	Estimated Hosting Fees	Estimated Design Fees
Small: 1–20 Pages Content integration, simple graphics and navigation	50–200 MB 1–10 e-mail accounts \$5–\$30 per month	\$500–\$1,200
Medium: 20–100 Pages Content integration, simple to moderate graphics and animation, dynamic navigation, database-driven pages	200–1 GB 1–200 e-mail accounts \$30–\$100 per month	\$1,200–\$10,000 + database fees
Large: Unlimited Pages Content integration, high-end graphics and animation, dynamic navigation, file/multi-media storage, database-driven applications	1–5 GB 1–500 e-mail accounts \$100–\$200 per month + database fees	\$10,000 and up

Armed with this information (and with a full understanding of what it means), you can feel confident in asking “disqualifying” questions of several potential website design and hosting consultants. For instance, if the hosting company doesn’t have a plan that fits your business size, can’t offer an uptime guarantee, or can’t supply the type of custom functionality your business needs, then scratch it off your list.

Get it in writing

As you evaluate potential web consultants, use the information you gather to prepare a formal Request for Proposal (RFP). The proposals you receive back from bidders will serve as the basis for your written contract with the consultant. When creating the RFP, include how and when bidders are to submit proposals, as well as:

- *introduction:* an overview of what you are trying to accomplish with the RFP and any information candidates should keep in mind
- *company and industry background:* information about your business, products and services, markets, etc.
- *objectives:* what the project must accomplish, including target dates and payment schedule
- *site requirements:* what the site is expected to do plus any specific functionality or technical considerations you need, such as e-commerce, multimedia capabilities, database integration or back-end system tie-in
- *scope:* the types of services you require, such as website planning, content organization, site production, training, etc.
- *hosting requirements:* request full details of the proposed hosting plan, including fees, plan features, the firm’s capabilities and services, etc.
- *maintenance considerations:* how you expect the site to be maintained, including whether the firm will assist with ongoing maintenance
- *any other items that are important to you,* such as how many prototypes or drafts you will be able to review within the fee proposed, when billing for modifications begins, back-up procedures, etc.
- *qualifications:* ask for client references, recent projects, and the URLs of websites the consultant has designed
- *conclusion:* restate your vision of the project deliverables, and request the proposal to list the bidder’s vision of achieving those deliverables, including any additional tasks proposed.

Working together effectively

The most important thing for you to do is share information with the web consultant. The more information you provide, the better the consultant can serve you.

While the consultant will try to learn about your industry, he or she cannot become an expert in your field. It’s your responsibility to supply pertinent information during the analysis phase of the website design project. The more open and complete you are about your business, work process and

competitors, the more capable the designer is in delivering a solution that works for you. If your business is based on proprietary or a highly competitive form of information, it’s wise to prepare and have your consultant sign a nondisclosure agreement to protect your business.

There are a few other things you can do to ensure a productive and effective working relationship with a communications consultant. Perhaps the most essential element in this type of relationship is trust. Respect the consultant’s expertise. Be open to suggestions. Don’t let the consultant’s ideas or suggestions threaten you—they certainly are not offered with that intention. Consider the consultant a partner. Don’t micromanage.

Be responsive. The web designer depends on information from you to do his or her job. When you are asked for information, provide it promptly. Respond to e-mail and telephone messages as soon as possible. When a draft of the site is ready for you to review, provide your comments in a timely manner. Usually only a small chunk of your time is needed, but the designer won’t be able to proceed until you reply. Your input is a critical path element.

Be realistic. Understand that it takes time and money to do things. Make your expectations clear, including your budget and deadlines, and discuss those with the consultant to make sure you understand each other. Realize that if you change the requirements in the middle of the assignment, the project will probably take more time and cost more money. Don’t be a “hurry up and wait” client—that is, one who gets overly excited about a project’s start time, but doesn’t have all the information and materials necessary to produce a completed product. The result is a partial implementation that burns through valuable development time.

Finally, the ideal client is one who values quality. It’s certainly possible to do a quick-and-dirty job. But you will both get much more satisfaction out of doing the job right. **CEP**

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