

Tips to Consider When Building a Website by Christine Mulgrave, BES Consulting Services

In a February, 2002 report the US government estimated that over 54% of American had Internet access, with two million new users being added monthly. A third of web surfers search for product and service information. In response to this more and more businesses are putting up their own websites. Adding to this, according to Score Media Matrix, online sales totaled more than \$6 billion for the month of July, 2002 alone, up by about 26% from July of 2001. But you might be asking, "Does my business really need a website and if so, how much will a website increase my sales?"

The short answer is yes; in order to compete in today's market place your company does need a web presence. When potential customers need information or wish to purchase your products or services during non-business hours the web allows them 24/7 buying power.

However, one has to be very clear on what the benefits are for having a website and how to go about building or getting a website built. A representative of Big Willie Car Detailing remarked that, the Internet "evened the playing field" for his company. Below are 5 simple tips to consider when building a website. I call it the Five Point Plan - **Purpose, Plan, Design, Cost and Marketing.**

Purpose: each website has a specific purpose and falls into one of the following categories: to inform, to sell or both. Government websites are generally for the sole purpose of informing. Auction websites are generally for the sole purpose of selling. Many websites fall into the gray area of doing both (informing in order to sell). For example, IBM and Kraft foods have a common goal - sell, sell, sell, but they provide you with useful information to promote favorable public relations. So, it is important to be clear on the purpose of your website, is it to inform or sell? If you aim to inform then you may start-off with a simple brochure site and build to an interactive site with chat rooms and message boards. If your aim is to sell then you will need an E-commerce site that has credit card processing capabilities.

Plan: the old cliché, "If you fail to plan you plan to fail." applies to website design and development. Every aspect has to be well thought out prior to development or you simply will waste time and money. Planning includes, but is not limited to deciding the purpose of your site, researching your online competition as well as their site offerings, determining your target audience. In addition, you will want to see what your competitors site and design a layout based upon other sites that you have seen, develop a timeline of when you want the site to launch and most importantly set a realistic budget. Your best bet may be to collaborate with a web designer/developer to do this or you can do it yourself by researching on the web.

Design: the design is something that you should decide upon in the planning stages, but it is so important that it needs its own section. The design layout covers how a website looks and how it is setup – basically it is the feel of the site. Effective design conveys a company's spirit/philosophy. Most websites have a pyramid structure - the home page on top, with all the sub-pages on the next levels down. Website navigation is not like a table of contents in a book where one idea follows the next, it has a more circular flow. You should be able to move to any other page from any place in the website and always be able to get to the home page. The navigation should be easy to read and follow. Your graphics should not interfere with the viewing of the text. And remember, graphic animations are cute once, but annoying a second and a third time. Flash animation, as with graphic animation, unless you have a specific purpose in mind, should run once then stop. The text should be easy to read and large enough to understand. Textured backgrounds can often conflict with the seeing of your text. The color scheme should not contradict itself. To get a better understanding of what a good website layout and design is, please take a look at some really bad websites at www.webpagethatsuck.com and compare them with some award winning ones at www.worldbestwebsites.com.

Build: there are many do-it-yourself website development programs and online portals out there, but at the very least you must have an understanding of web norms, uploading protocol, image control, html file naming standards, etc. None of this is terribly difficult to learn, but in the time you spend figuring out how to build a site you could have hired an expert and as I said before, time equals money.

In order to find a qualified web developer talk to friends, other business owners who have a website or look through the classifieds. It is best to find a web developer in your area, because web development is an interactive process and you may need to meet face-to-face once or twice. When hiring a web developer they should have the Three E's: **Experience, Evidence** and **Ethics**. Experience refers to any certifications that they might have in terms of web design and development or how much they have been involved in the business of web design and development or the number of sites that they have produced. Evidence refers to actual websites that you can see, the end product. No proof should equal no sale. Ethics refers to principles under which a web developer operates. Find out what previous clients have to say about their work performance, customer relations skills, product delivery, etc. Once you have made your decision make sure make sure that you get a contract, which includes a timeline and graphic site map upfront.

Costs: building a website is a business investment. Most web developers will either provide a package deal or charge by the hour or quote a price for a project. Make sure that you are quoted a price in writing and understand the payment process before a job begins. Do not make a final payment until your site is fully launched. Most web developers will require a one third down payment. The next third at some point during the job and the balance upon completion. Make sure that you fully understand what you are getting and what you are paying for. A simple web design and development using html, not database driven xml can begin at \$1,000 and go up to \$20,000 depending on the features that you need. Database drive sites begin at \$5,000 and up. Please note: the more online interaction a site offers the higher the cost. Hidden costs often not spelled out in a package deals are: domain name registration, hosting services and fees, site maintenance, placement on search engines (SEO – search engine optimization), E-commerce and graphic, text editing and usability testing. And remember, "You get what you pay for."

Marketing: as in any business marketing and advertising is the key to selling your product and services. A website can be your digital brochure or portal or it can serve as virtual storefront or office. A website allows you to interact with people locally, nationally and internationally all at the same time. But if your company does not have an effective marketing plan in place no one will know about your online venture. Getting listed on search engines and even paying for placement a search engine is a start, but domain name recognition/branding is what you really need. How will you get people to live, feel, breathe your website name? Your web developer should be able to advise you in this matter, but one strategy is to promote your website in print ads, flyers, brochures, postcards, etc. Place the aforementioned materials in places where your target audience will see them. Having a website does not eliminate the tried and true marketing strategies, it just adds a new dimension and new ways in which to make your business more accessible to customers and potential customers.

So remember: Decide on a **purpose**, **plan** out your website, **design** an easy to navigate, uncluttered, consistent website, **build** using the 3 E's approach in the most **cost** effective manner possible and **market** the dickens out of it.

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