

Website Tips for Small Business Owners

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Congratulations – you’ve decided to launch a business, and you know that in this day and age, all businesses should have a strong online presence. Think about it – how many times do you hear about a company and then “Google it”? Having a website for your business gives it legitimacy, and provides an excellent opportunity to share your message with a potential customer. Through your website, customers (should) get a feel for who you are, what you’re all about, and how to get in touch with you.

So you know you want a website for your business – but how do you go about it? Where to start? You probably want an attractive website that functions well, and represents you, but you probably don’t have a lot of money at the start-up stage. Here are some recommendations for how to get your business online, while making sure you get the most value for your money.

Determine Your Needs

How do you picture your business’s website? What does your business need online? Most small businesses only need a “brochure website” (a simple, attractive website that lists information about the company and how to get in touch) at first. However, you may need more than a basic site, or you may need more from your website in the future. Consider your current needs and try to anticipate your future needs. A good website should grow with your business.

For extra clarity, it’s always a good idea to ask your customers for advice. What would they like to see in your business’s website? If you had online shopping, would they use it? Do they want to see photos of your company’s location, or videos of you in production? In talking with your customers, you might be surprised to learn they may have great ideas that you never thought of.

Do I have to hire someone? Or can I make my website myself?

You don’t have to hire someone to make your business’s website. There are a number of free and inexpensive tools online for creating your own site. Do a Google search for “free website” and you’ll see a number of options, most of which are template-based solutions. You choose a “look” from a short list, plunk in your information, and you’re done.

But the DIY method isn’t always the best. Some things to consider: web templates offer NO originality. Some of them are of questionable quality, and do not use the latest standards in code. You run the risk of your website being incompatible with different web browsers. You might find the technology difficult to work with and hard to update. And forget about site maintenance and support. What if you have technical difficulties? Who will help you?

The low up-front cost of a DIY website is attractive, but if you choose to build your website on your own, you may find that you end up unhappy in the end. Odds are, your template-based website will end up being bland, unremarkable, and won’t truly represent who you are. Is this the look you want to present to your customers?

Yes, a DIY website might be “good enough”. But is “good enough” really what you’re striving for? Your website should be attractive, professional, well constructed, and original - just like your business. The only way to ensure that you get something phenomenal is to work with a Web Professional.

What's a Web Professional?

A Web Professional can be an individual, or a group of people (a creative agency, or a design firm). A Web Professional has design theory and technical skills, and can translate ideas and concepts into a great looking website. Web Professionals know the latest in design trends, technical specifications, and Internet practices. It is this expertise that you're paying for, not just the final product.

Finding a Web Professional

So you've decided to work with a Web Professional – excellent choice. Now, how to find one? You could go the traditional route of writing a creative brief, and putting out a Request for Proposals. Then Web Professionals will submit proposals, make presentations, and meet with you for interviews. This is a great process, but it can take a lot of time. Many small business owners want your business website up and running as soon as possible.

You can look for a Web Professional on your own, without going through the Request for Proposal process. Ask for referrals from other small business owners. When you're online yourself, looking at other websites, if you see one you like, look for a link to the web designer. Most websites have a "site designed by XX" link. If you like the look of a particular website, get in touch with that designer and see if they're a good fit.

Things to consider when looking for a Web Professional:

1. Do you like their website? Choosing a Web Professional with a bad website is like choosing a hair stylist with a bad haircut. Odds are, if you don't like their website, you're not going to like what they do for your site.
2. Have a look at the Web Professional's portfolio. Do you see a range of looks, for a range of clients? Or do most of their projects look the same? This will give you a sense of what they can do for you. If you don't find any project in their portfolio that aligns with your business's aesthetic, then this isn't the right fit for you.
3. Make sure the Web Professional will create an original web design for you, and not recycle their designs or work from pre-existing web templates. Your Web Professional should understand your unique business needs. You didn't design your business from a template – so don't accept a Web Professional who will make your website from one.
4. Ask if the Web Professional ensures that their websites are up-to-date with the latest web technologies and web standards, and if their sites validate for proper code. It's a technical question, but it's the best way to make sure that they know what they're doing, and that their web creations will hold up over time. Bad code = bad website.
5. Speaking of code, make sure you choose a Web Professional who can "talk the talk" with technical detail, but can also turn off the "tech speak" and communicate with you plain and simply, in a language you understand. If you don't understand what they're saying, it's not a good fit.
6. Have a discussion about ongoing website maintenance. It is common practice and widely expected that websites are current and up-to-date. You might have a simple "brochure" website now, but you might want to add increased functionality later. Websites should be built with change in mind. Who will make changes and updates to your website after you launch? At what cost? Your relationship with your Web Professional shouldn't end when the website is launched.

You may be tempted to ask a Web Professional to do some preliminary work for you before hiring them, for example, asking them to do some "rough sketches" for you, so you can decide whether you like them or not. That's a concept known as speculative ("spec") work, and it's a bad idea.

In the Design Community, spec work is widely avoided. Most Web Professionals won't do it, and not just for financial reasons. Even though it's tempting to "try before you buy", spec work is bad for everyone involved. Spec work forces the Web Professional to focus on the final product, not the process, of creating work for you. If you haven't gone through the design process, how could the Web Professional possibly know what would work for you? If you request spec work, you will likely be turned down.

Working With a Web Professional

Communication is key to a successful working relationship with your Web Professional. The particulars of the design process are bound to be different with each individual Web Professional. But you should always feel as if there IS a clearly defined process, and you should be confident of where you are in that process.

Make sure you have a contract. It will protect you and your Web Professional, and should outline the work involved, the fee and payment schedule, copyright issues, ongoing site maintenance, etc. If you're paying someone to build you a website without a contract, they can disappear with your website and your money, and you will not be protected. Put it on paper - it's just good business sense, and it benefits both of you.

Your Site is Launched – Now What?

You've now invested a lot of time, energy, and money into getting your business online. You have a website, and it's beautiful. You've put your new web address on your business cards. You've sent an email to all your family and friends encouraging them to check out your new site. And, since you chose to work with a Web Professional, you have sophisticated analytical software on your website to track web traffic.

So you're done, right? No way. After a couple of months, you notice your web traffic starts to fall off. You've fallen for a common website owner trap: "if you build it, they will come". You thought all you had to do was make a website, and then it would magically appear at the top of Google search results, and your phone would be ringing off the hook with new business. Unfortunately, that's not the way it works. You need to promote your website.

Online advertising, blogging, Facebook, Twitter, and link sharing are just a few suggestions for website promotion. Ask your Web Professional for help – the same person who helped you get your site online should have tips on how to keep it fresh, and keep it working for you. It should be part of your ongoing relationship, and is just another example of the value of working with a Web Professional.

About the Author

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