



DECISION TOOLKIT

What you need to know to get started on your website.

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Why you need a website

Q:

My business is very small, just me and two employees, and our product really can't be sold online.

I don't sell products I only offer services.

Do I really need a website?

A: That's a good question. In fact, it's one of the most important and most frequently asked questions.

So, should your business have a website, even if your business is small and sells products or services you don't think can be sold online? My answer is a resounding: **Yes**, if you have a business, you should have a website. Period. No question. Without a doubt.

Also, do not be so quick as to dismiss your product as one that cannot be sold online. Today there's very little that cannot be sold over the internet. During 2016 there were 211 million shoppers that were online, purchasing everything from books to computers to cars to real estate to lawn services to home building to you name it. If you can imagine it, someone will figure out how to sell it online.

I am not saying you should put all your efforts into selling your wares over the internet, but if your product lends itself to easy online sales, you should certainly be considering it. The point I am making here is that you should at the very least have a presence on the web so that customers, potential employees, business partners and perhaps even investors can quickly and easily find out more about your business and the products or services you have to offer.

That being said, it's not enough that you just have a website. You must have a professional-looking site if you want to be taken

seriously. Since many consumers now search for information online prior to making a purchase at a brick-and-mortar store, your site may be the first chance you have at making a good impression on a potential buyer. If your site looks like it was designed by a barrel of colorblind monkeys, your chance at making a good first impression will be lost.

One of the great things about the internet is that it has leveled the playing field when it comes to competing with the big boys. As mentioned, you have one shot at making a good first impression. With a well-designed site, your little operation can project the image and professionalism of a much larger company. The inverse is also true. I've seen many big company websites that were so badly designed and hard to navigate that they completely lacked professionalism and credibility. Good for you, too bad for them.

You also mention that yours is a small operation, but when it comes to benefiting from a website, size does not matter. I don't care if you're a one-man show or a 10,000-employee corporate giant; if you don't have a website, you're losing business to other companies that do.

Here's the exception to my rule: It's actually better to have no website at all than to have one that makes your business look bad. Your site speaks volumes about your business. It either says, "Hey, look, we take our business so seriously that we have created this wonderful site for our customers!" or it screams, "Hey, look, I let my 10-year-old nephew design my site. Good luck finding anything!"

Your website is an important part of your business. Make sure you treat it as such.

I Need a Website for My Small Business – Where to Start?

So, after spending hours on a certain domain name registration site – you know, the one with the female race car driver as its spokeswoman — you’ve finally found the perfect domain name for your small business. Now all you need to do is find a web designer and tell him to get going on the website, right? Wrong! In today’s digital world, an effective website is the cornerstone of any small business’s marketing strategy, so it’s worth it to start off on the right foot. Here are a few things to think about before your initial meeting with your web designer.

First, you need to decide what the function of your website will be. What exactly do you want it to do? Will it primarily serve as an online business card, with basic information on you and your offerings, along with a way to reach you? Perhaps you want to capture the names and email address of prospective customers by having them sign up for a newsletter or free report. Or maybe you want to give out helpful tips through a blog, or even sell your products or services online. Whatever you want your website to do, it’s extremely important to determine all the features you’ll need before any of the work begins, or you may end up wasting a lot of valuable time (and money) adding functionality later on in the development process.

Next, how hands-on will you be when it comes to maintaining the website? You may just want to let your design firm handle everything – even writing and posting to your blog – so that you can concentrate on other business tasks. On the other hand, you might want to be able to publish a blog post, change an image, or update your product or service offerings yourself without waiting for someone else to do it. Your decision on this matter will most likely affect the technology used in constructing the website, and so your level of involvement needs to be determined early in the process.

Finally, how will people find your website? Putting your domain name on your business cards and marketing materials is a no-brainer, but ideally you'd like potential customers to be able to find it through other means, as well. Proper search engine optimization (SEO) can help your website rank highly in the search engines, thus increasing traffic. Integration with social media, email marketing, and other online and offline marketing methods can also help get more traffic to your website. Whatever methods you use to get viewers to check out your website, make sure it's worth the visit by making it easy to use, up-to-date, and engaging.

Now you're ready to schedule that meeting with your web designer and get cracking on your website!

I Already Have a Website. Why Do I Need to Have It Redesigned?

Stop for a moment and think: when was the last time your business website was updated? Better yet, when was the last time you even looked at your site?

When the Internet was first taking off in the 90's, simply having a business website put you ahead of the curve. Nowadays, it's not enough. A good website is accessible on any device, easy to navigate and keeps the consumer's attention from the first moment he or she lands on the home page.

There's no doubt that designing a business website is a massive project to take on, but once it's finished, many business owners upload it and forget about it, especially if the site isn't set up for e-commerce. What they don't realize is that their website is their first line of digital marketing, and if people don't know about or want to visit your business website, they probably won't visit your store either.

But why go so far as to redesign the whole thing? Read on if you need a little extra convincing.

The design is not responsive

In recent years, online activity has dramatically shifted from the traditional browser on a PC or Mac to the app of mobile browser. New technology, such as smartphones and tablets, have made it easier for web surfers to simply open an app, do a quick search and find what they're looking for. Unfortunately, not all sites can be viewed on one of these mobile devices.

So, what is a responsive design? Basically, it's the certain coding and styling of a website so that it is accessible across all media platforms. That means one business website is designed for browsers on

laptops, phones, tablets, and any other device, rather than creating different websites for each device.

Google tends to prefer these sites because they only need to be catalogued once, so the search engine pushes them further up in the results. With responsive design, your site will have a search engine optimization (SEO) advantage over its competitors who haven't quite gotten on board yet.

Not Optimized for SEO

Take a moment and Google your company's name or "business type, city it's in" (i.e. shoe stores, Sydney). Does your business website pop up within the first few search results? If not, then your site is definitely not SEO-friendly. If you don't think that matters, remember that about 70 percent of people do not click past the first page, and an estimated 33 percent of search results traffic goes straight to the first site listed.

SEO incorporates several different aspects of web design geared towards pushing a site to the top of search results. With a combination of responsive web design, a healthy link profile and frequent updates to the site (such as a blog post every week), your site will slowly climb its way higher and higher in search results.

It all starts with a well-designed business website.

It's impossible to navigate

When was the last time you really tried to navigate around your business website? Do you know how to find your contact information or your store hours? How long is the checkout process and does it flow well?

One of the biggest turn-offs for users is a site that is impossible to navigate. If consumers can't find what they're looking for, they will take their business to a website that is easier to use. Ask your family and friends to visit your site and click around. You can also find free

downloadable programs and websites that will allow you to upload pages of your site and get real feedback from consumers.

The business website looks dated

Like fashion and architecture, some fads go out of style. Does your site still have background music that plays whenever someone lands on the home page? Are you using Flash instead of HTML 5? Consumers can certainly notice when your site looks like it was designed ten years ago, and that's enough to make customers second-guess themselves before buying from you.

The fact is that an out-of-date business website hurts your credibility. If consumers think your website looks questionable and out-of-date, they'll take their business elsewhere and find someone with a trustworthy website.

It needs a little more functionality

If you're not interacting with your business website on a daily, weekly or even monthly basis, your customers probably aren't either. Give them a reason to keep coming back by adding new functional features to your site.

A blog is a great way to get people to visit your site often, and forums allow for conversation among consumers. With both features, you get the chance to interact with them and show yourself as an expert in the field. Adding an e-commerce feature also gives consumers a reason to visit your business website again and again.

All these features will require a massive redesign and should be handled by an expert, who will also ensure the site is still easy to navigate even with the new design. After all, if you're really committed to these changes, then you might as well get them done right the first time.

A little change is good for you

Take one last look at your site and think back to what your company was like when it was first designed. Maybe you were in a smaller location with only one other employee and now you've got a larger store and double the amount of employees.

Your site needs to reflect your growth and the changes of your company . Is your copyright date still 2009? Is the address even correct? These details might look minor to you, but your customers are definitely going to notice. If they can't find updated information on you, they probably won't waste their time and instead go right to a competitor.

10 Things Every Small-Business Website Needs

From contact information to customer testimonials, here are the essentials that will effectively help you do business.

The Web is full of horrendous sites, and we're not just talking about bad design. There are many other elements besides how your website looks that go into making it customer-friendly -- not to mention something that inspires them to actually do business with you.

From thorough contact information to customer testimonials, here are the essentials that every business website should have for it to effectively help you do business.

1. A clear description of who you are

Someone who stumbles upon your website shouldn't have to do investigative work to figure out what, exactly, it is that you do. That means clearly stating your name and summing up your products or services right on the homepage. Tell people this is the right website that they have been searching for. A clear description will attract the visitor's attention immediately within 2-3 seconds, and encourage them to stay on your website longer."

2. A simple, sensible Web address

Don't make things complicated. Your domain name is like your brand. It should be easy for a user to type it into a Web browser or an e-mail address. I always recommend the .com domain as users are conditioned to type that extension when they enter a Web address. For non-profits or organizations, I usually recommend using a .org domain for branding purposes, but also recommend having a .com version of the domain in case a user accidentally types the .com address.

I also suggest avoiding dashes (which can cause SEO headaches) and numbers (which can cause confusion for customers).

3. An easily-navigated site map

Clear links to the most important pages, and a site map, are crucial for guiding visitors to the information they're looking for.

Be sure your navigation is clearly laid out. I always recommend using dropdowns in the navigation menu so the visitor can see the content under every heading from virtually any page. You want to make it very easy for your visitors to find what they are looking for, or what you want them to know.

4. Easy-to-find contact information

You wouldn't want to lose a customer to a competitor just because you made it difficult for them to get in touch with you.

Not every online visitor has the patience to click through every page on your website to find the contact information.

The best place for the contact information is the top left or top right corner of the home page. It is also a good practice to include contact information in every page of the website in the footer or side bar or even in top right corner, which helps the visitors to find it more easily."

You should also be sure to include several ways for them to contact you -- phone, e-mail, and a standard contact form, are all good options. Forbes also suggests including your address, and even a link to your location in Google maps.

One of the biggest mistakes business owners make is to force only one way to reach them. The point is to make it very easy for users to communicate with you on their terms.

5. Customer testimonials

Honest words from others help make your products or services more tangible to customers who are visiting you online.

They help your potential customers to build trust in you, especially if you are new. And they help shoppers to confirm whether the product or services meet their needs.

People love to hear stories from real people. They help people find out other things you haven't said on your website.

6. An obvious call to action

Tell the online visitors literally what you want them to do with clear tones of command. For instance, you may want them to call you now for free quote, or sign up to your exclusively online coupons, or add products to the online shopping cart, etc.

Also call attention to your suggestion -- by using special buttons or highlighting the text, for example.

7. Know the basics of SEO

Your website won't do you as much good if no one can stumble upon it. Become familiar with the SEO basics to make it more accessible by search engine.

You don't need to employ mysterious, ninja, black hat SEO types to rank well on the search engines. Simply make sure your website is coded correctly.

That means using the correct keywords throughout your text, putting in plenty of links, naming your page titles and URLs correctly, and employing the magic of images and videos.

8. Fresh, quality content

For many businesses, your website is your first impression on a customer. You want to give them what they're looking for, and perhaps even give them a reason to keep coming back.

The user is looking for something. Make sure you give it to them.... and be sure your content is original, well written and valuable.

Fresh content is a goldmine for SEO, as well. You can keep your content from getting stale (and give your company some personality,

too) by incorporating a regularly-updated blog or connecting in your social media feeds.

9. A secure hosting platform

Having your online information hijacked is a nightmare, and, should it happen to your business, it could cost you customers.

It is imperative that you have a secure, trustworthy hosting company to keep the bad guys out and your content up and running. It is also very important to keep your content management system updated in order to stay one step ahead of the hackers.

10. A design and style that's friendly to online readers

As Forbes puts it, "Web surfers have the attention spans of drunken gnats."

Online visitors often scan through a Web page to sample the content first when they open a new Web page. If they feel like they are on the right page, they will slow down to read the full story. To enhance user's experience on your small business website, you need to organize the content for scanning.

In the end, simplicity and basic colors are the best bet. Again, the content is the focus, not dancing clowns at the top of the page.

Build a Killer Website:

20 Dos and Don'ts

If you do it right, your website can be the best marketing tool you have.

I'm continually surprised by how many people call my design company with very firm ideas about what they want on their business website and yet, they haven't thought through some of the most basic questions first. For this reason, our first question is always "Why do you need a site?," not "What do you want on it?"

At bottom your website is a marketing tool. For many businesses, it's the only source of business. If done right, it can be a major part of yours.

Here's my quick-hit list of the top dos and don'ts before you get started:

Do:

1. **Set smart goals.** And make sure they're measurable. Here are a few great ones a Web designer wants to hear: increase conversion rates, increase sales, generate more leads, reduce overhead, and improve brand awareness.
2. **Know your target market.** You are going to use your website as a tool for your business. Knowing who and what audience you want to attract to your website and business is crucial. A good web developer will be keen to this and will work with you to identify your key market.
3. **Plan on becoming an SEO wizard.** Sure, you're going to want help from the pros and eventually you might even need your own in-house SEO expert, but search engine optimization

is something you need to know about too. It has one of the highest ROIs in marketing. Plus, do it right and SEO can literally put your marketing on autopilot, allowing you to focus on improving the quality of your business, instead of figuring out how to bring in customers to your site.

4. **Use open source tools.** You could go with a proprietary content management system (CMS) but that means you're typically stuck with one company and paying hefty license fees to boot. Do yourself a favor and go with an open-source system—I like DNN and WordPress—that any developer can access.
5. **Think about your mobile strategy simultaneously.** Research the percentage of your visitors that are likely to use mobile devices to access your site. If it's high, you may want to consider building a separate mobile version of your site, or even an app. If it's relatively low, just make sure your website works on smart phones, but don't invest into a mobile version.
6. **Steal from your competitors.** Before you build your site, check out your competitors and write down the things they do well. If you like the look and feel of another site, there's no reason not to start with something you like and then make it your own.
7. **Develop your content.** The biggest slow-down in the Web design process is content. If you're going to sell products on your site, get product photos and product descriptions ready. If you sell services, you'll need a description of each service. Get as much of your content together before you start building your site—it will save you weeks.

8. **Write with calls to action in mind.** Good calls to action allow visitors to quickly decide what they want to do next. Having a big sale? Don't just write a banner that says "50% off all products." Write one that says "50% off all products, [CLICK HERE](#) to view them."
9. **Always answer the question "why?"** Have you ever walked up to someone you've never met, handed them a business card, and walked away without saying a word? Likely not. If you want people to do something on your website, such as sign up for your newsletter, don't just put up a box that says "enter email" or even "sign up for newsletter"—you'll get a very weak conversion rate. Tell them why they should do it: "Sign up for our newsletter to receive weekly specials." Same thing goes for Twitter and Facebook logos. Just putting them up isn't smart. Tell people why they should follow you on Twitter or friend you on Facebook. What will they get out of it?
10. **Trust your Web designer.** I tend to see the worst end results with customers who come in with a "I know what I want, just do what I tell you" attitude. You hired an expert because they know more than you, right? Let them do what they do best and they're more likely to meet and often exceed your goals.

Don't:

1. **Do it yourself.** I know—I run a Web design firm, so of course I'm going to say this. But seriously, your website is often where your customers' first experience your brand. If it looks homemade, they're going to make assumptions about your business that you want to avoid.
2. **Make people think.** When visitors come to your website, they typically already know what they want out of it. Do a three-second test: If within three seconds a visitor can't figure out what to do next, go back to the drawing board.
3. **Expect visitors.** Lose the "if you build it, they will come" mentality. Simply putting up your site will not result in any visitors.
4. **Spend all your money.** Don't max out your entire budget on the website. You can get a well-designed site for under \$1,000 from a freelancer, or a few thousand dollars from a professional agency. And you can always make improvements as your business grows. It's far more important initially to have some money left over for a marketing budget so you can actually make a return on your investment.
5. **Add a blog.** Are you really going to write posts? Be honest. If you won't, then forget about a blog. A website with an outdated blog can create the perception that your company is small or even out of business.
6. **Add Twitter and Facebook buttons.** If a potential client clicks through to your social pages and sees hardly any followers, they may lose trust in you. First build up your social presence, then commit to posting and engaging your fans on a regular basis, and only then promote them on your website.

Also keep in mind that some businesses simply don't belong on Twitter or Facebook.

7. **Try to please everyone.** Your website will be a mess if you try to accommodate every type of visitor who might come along. Figure out who is likely to be your most frequent users and focus on creating the best experience for them.

8. **Add testimonials.** Building credibility is important, but too often testimonials sound fake. "They are great!" says John Smith" simply isn't believable. If you're going to have testimonials make sure they are specific, and something people can relate to.

9. **Use Flash.** Some sites still need it, but if you can, avoid it. Adobe just announced that it will no longer support Flash on mobile devices and set-top-boxes. The last thing you want is for a potential customer to be unable to open your site.

10. **Expect a killer website overnight.** Good websites take time to build. If you want the best results out of your site, be prepared for several months of work.