



# WEB BUILDING



# E-COMMERCE STRATEGIES

# PLANNING YOUR WEB PRESENCE

Deciding you want your small business to perk up its Web presence is the first step of many to launching a successful Internet platform for your online operations. And designing and maintaining an attractive website is just the start; modern age business operations should also be participating in social networking and media campaigns online. This manual deals with the nuts and bolts, as well as the costs, involved in creating and presenting a website that portrays your business in the best possible light. In addition, following this guide will allow your company to promote brand strategy, drive sales and engage your customers with bilateral conversations, all as a result of strong online development.

The following pages will discuss:

- Defining your mission and consumer audience
- Selecting your Top Level Domain (TLD)
- Building your website (and exploring the tools to do so)
- Developing and acquiring content
- Pros and cons of current web tech
- Hosting
- E-commerce and carts
- SEO strategy

## DEFINING YOUR MISSION AND CUSTOMERS

Whether their products are brick and mortar or more ideologically based, all websites are selling something. Not all transactions are financial – some hobbyist site owners may only be looking to build traffic – but most small business owners are looking to enlarge sales opportunities and grow their bottom

line. It's important for every business owner to ask themselves the following questions in regard to their online presence:

- What are you selling and why are you doing it on the Web?
- Are you supplementing an existing brick and mortar operation or are you a Web-based e-tailer?
- How much can you afford to spend and how do you plan to drive traffic to your website?
- Will your site consist of a few pages, or thousands of e-commerce listing pages?
- Are the pages static, or do they feature extensive interaction, audio, animation or video?

It's also important to take your customer base (current and potential) into consideration.

- What is the age, gender and cultural background of your demographic?
- Where do they live and what language(s) do they speak?
- What is their educational background and at what level do they read?
- What are they trying to achieve by visiting your site?
- Are they Web experts or novices?

Your projected sales can fail to materialize if any of these factors are not properly addressed. If your website is written like a doctoral thesis but your visitors are primarily high school dropouts, you are wasting time, energy and effort on both ends.

Once you have answered the questions above, you can begin to integrate that information into your mission statement. This short thesis should inform your visitors of your qualifications to serve their needs, explain how you plan to do so and demonstrate your credentials for competing in this market space.

# SELECTING A DOMAIN NAME AND TLD

The best domain names are short, easy to remember and indelibly tied to the brand. Most small business websites are named after their company; however, some Web entrepreneurs discover that someone else already owns their desired name. In that case, you can either attempt to buy the domain name, which can be very expensive, or you can choose from the following options.

Your company name is Central Widgethouse, but Centralwidgethouse.com is unavailable. You can:

1. *Break it up.* Central-widget-house.com or Central-widgethouse.com
2. *Add or subtract from it.* Centralwidgethse.com or Thecentralwidgethouse.com
3. *Try a different TLD (extension).* Centralwidgethouse.info or Centralwidgethouse.net

Each option has pros and cons. If you are driving traffic primarily through print or broadcast ads, then your customer will have to type in your name, dashes and abbreviations, which can lead them astray. However, if your traffic arrives through links, the precise domain name becomes somewhat irrelevant.

If you absolutely have to have a domain name that is already as signed you can do a WHOIS check to see when it expires. If the expiration date is coming up, you can place a bet that it will not be immediately renewed by using a service like godaddy.com, which will try to grab it the instant it comes available.

It pays to shop around for registrars, as the price for a dot-com domain can vary anywhere between 5 and 30 dollars per year, and it makes no difference how it's registered. A dot -com is a dot-com is a dot-com.

# DIY OR PRO?

After securing your domain name, you can begin to build your site. You can easily spend a lot of money hiring someone to build a beautiful website, but don't forget: good, solid design with effective user interfacing is more important than bells and whistles.

## Templates

Many e-tailers offer thousands of turn-key templates to use for your new website design and content management – all you have to do is drop in your logo and you're good to go, with no programming or specialized software experience required. Sites can be simple or complex with varying degrees of technology, from static HTML to Flash, Java or other advanced databases. Many of these templates cost less than \$100.

## Web Editor Packages

Maybe you have the in-house skills to tackle building your own website. If you do, then you must choose between WYSIWG and HTML editors. The former is a group of low maintenance graphic editors, which cost hundreds of dollars and allow beginners to create sites through "move the elements" interfaces; the latter is a coding-only interface and best suited to advanced programmers.

## Finding an Affordable Pro

If templates are too restrictive, you may want to turn to a professional Web designer. Websites are complex and extremely labor intensive to create, so be aware of how much you have to spend and your pricing agreement with the designer. Save money by posting to a freelance programmer site and contracting out the design for a set price. An ad costs only a few dollars and will attract bids from around the world: after choosing your designer and checking their background and qualifications, you can achieve a custom site for a relatively low cost.

## Tools

The process of designing a website creates structure, but your visitors are coming to experience content. What you have on your site is key to determining your success. No effort should be spared to ensure it is professional, ethical, relevant and engaging.

# DEVELOPING AND ACQUIRING CONTENT

Unless you're a multi-talented writer, graphic artist, photographer, sound engineer and videographer, you'll need to subcontract your content. Freelancer sites are great places to find these professionals and programmers.

*Writers* – There are several million freelance writers who make their services available on the Web. Plan for a minimum of two cents per word for basic verbiage. Should your content be complex or technical you may exceed ten cents per word. Avoid hourly rates.

*Graphic Artists* – Graphical elements of reasonable quality may be obtained from \$40 or so and up, with logos starting at \$150 and easily shooting to four and even five figures. Carefully explaining your concepts to the artist at the beginning will save you from costly do overs. Be realistic: If you want paintings that would suit the Louvre and Pixar-level 3D animations, be ready to empty your bank account.

*Photographers* – If you have specific product or conceptual photographic needs, you'll need to hire a pro at \$60 an hour and up. If you can make do with conceptually more generic photography, image sites where you can choose from millions of photos on every imaginable topic are readily available. You can buy a \$250 membership from some sites and download everything you can click on for a full month.

*Multimedia Specialists* – Professional videos sell product:

always contract experienced videographers who use the best equipment. Plan on spending \$200 for the most basic one-minute talking head video to several thousands of dollars for anything more complex involving sets or locations.

## PROS AND CONS OF WEB TECHNOLOGIES

You can make a website do almost anything by applying leading Web technologies. Some software is free, while some - such as Flash Professional – costs \$700 and up. The content in many of these formats cannot be fully indexed by search engines, so always incorporate a metadata HTML copy of your key content. Here are some pros and cons for some leading technologies:

*Flash* – This was the best way of providing animation, interactivity and video on the Web until Apple threw a wrench into the works by refusing to support it on its mobile devices, opting instead for HTML5. Flash is extremely capable but bandwidth hungry - to the point where animations can take over a minute to load on “lite” broadband connections and much longer on dial-up networks.

*HTML5* – Provides fast playback on even the slowest connections but doesn't support Digital Rights Management, so copyrighted commercial content cannot be legally played on it.

*Silverlight* – Allows you to incorporate light, small, quick applications on your website without forcing your visitor to download the entire .NET framework. Silverlight is designed on Windows only using Microsoft tools, not the industry standard Adobe Creative Suite.

*Java* – This widespread technology can create applets, which are embedded in Web pages and allow animation and interactivity. Most online games are written in Java, and it

generally requires an experienced programmer to make it work properly.

*ActiveX* – Another applet technology, but is restricted to Internet Explorer and has potential security issues due to allowing execution of native code on your visitor's computer, which can be leveraged by hackers.

*MySQL* – The leading database application for website owners who display large amounts of formatted information and have forms for visitor entry of data and passwords. MySQL is not a general-public Access-type of database, so it's difficult to learn and customize.

*Drupal and Joomla* – These leading content management systems portray and capture database information primarily via MySQL. The learning curve is steeper than the sides of Mt. Everest, so if you need these capabilities: hire a professional.

*FTP* – Your website must be uploaded to your host via the File Transfer Protocol (FTP). Fortunately, most FTP programs are easy to use. Once you key in the parameters your host has provided, you'll see two panes: just move files from your computer's pane on the left to the server's pane on the right in order to make them available to your website visitors. Some FTP programs are freeware, and some hosts even offer proper FTP facilities in your site's control panel.

## **ANALYTICS AND WEBMASTER TOOLS**

There are various offerings in the analytics arena, but none compares to the Google sites. Google Analytics generates highly detailed statistics about your website visitors and integrates them seamlessly with AdWords. Google Webmaster Tools lets you check your indexing status and optimize your web site for maximum visibility. Both of these services are indispensable to any website owner - and best of all, they're free.

# HOSTING

Having a website without a host is like writing a book without a publisher: it might be a great book, but no one will ever read it. For hosting, you have three main options:

*Shared* – This is the most common and least expensive form of hosting, at around \$5 to \$20 a month. You contract with a company that operates servers and your data will be placed on a computer, alongside a number of other websites. The limitations of shared hosting only come into play if your site attracts millions of visitors or serves massive amounts of data. Should you ever grow to that level, you can always graduate to...

*Dedicated* – You contract with a company to place your data on a computer they operate exclusively for you. These servers tend to be marginally faster and allow you to store and serve much more data. The drawback is that the cost ranges from \$100 to \$500 or more per month.

*Own* – Operating your own server infrastructure is something that should only be considered by large enterprises. Be ready to make up front outlays of many thousands of dollars and be on call 24/7 to prevent downtime.

# COMMERCE

You have set up your offerings in your online storefront, but now you need to make it possible for your customer to buy: checkout systems must be implemented in every product site to capture the buyer's ordering information and direct the payment into your bank account.

# E-COMMERCE AND CARTS

Designing your own e-commerce structure and shopping cart is a bit like reinventing the wheel: chances are you would never be able to do it as well as the established providers. Their service cost ranges from \$50 to \$250 to buy, and the monthly charges are from \$30 and up. Beware of setup or licensing fees, which can add well over \$1,000. When choosing a cart provider, focus on the ones who provide simplicity, service and support. Make sure your checkout process is as elementary as possible or you will lose the sales from your more tech-challenged buyers.

# MERCHANT ACCOUNTS

Most websites don't have their own merchant accounts like retail stores, but use gateway services to process payments on their behalf in exchange for a commission of around 3%. The best-known gateway is PayPal, but many business sites use other providers as well. Note that some gateways can charge you \$100 setup and \$20 a month to provide the same service as the fee-free PayPal. Also note that at the first sign of any funny business, most gateways will seize your funds and shut down your account.

# SEO

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is more art than science; some maintain it is outright voodoo. For example, some experts say that your TLD has to be dot-com to get high search engine rankings (SERPs); others insist that it makes no difference. You want to maximize your indexing potential in the search engines, but be aware that this goal represents a moving target. Major engines like Google change their algorithms constantly: what works one day will fail the next.

# CURRENT BEST PRACTICE

There is no substitute for valuable, original content that gradually generates spontaneous placements of links all over the Web by enthusiastic customers. However, every business owner wants results right now, so there are some ways to kickstart the process:

## Backlinking: Directories, Article Marketing and Forum Posts

A link on any reputable, high traffic website pointing to your domain is worth its weight in gold. Posting forum comments backlinked to your site, as well as engaging in directory and article placements, can create valid albeit non-spontaneous links. But place too many links too fast and you'll be "sandboxed," or banished, from SERPs altogether.

## Buying Links, AdWords, PPC, Etc.

Purchasing links on other websites, as well as bidding for Google AdWords and other Pay Per Click programs, can be strategically valid, but must be approached with a great deal of trepidation by any small business on the Web. It's easy to overspend with these purchases and fail to reach the break-even point. Each small business has a different set of opportunities through these programs, but always proceed with great caution and your hand firmly on your wallet.

## Value of Promotion, Press Release and Blogs

While there is no such thing as bad publicity, net etiquette plays fast and loose with traditional promotions. Take advantage of the free and nearly free options available for promoting a website: blog and press releases are easily written and distributed, and can provide valuable linkbacks.

## White vs. Black Hat

The difference between white and black hat is the difference between right and wrong: crime does not pay in bank robberies or in SEO, and it is strongly recommended you promote your site strictly ethically. Search engines are getting better at catching cheats every day, and black hatters can look forward to swift deletion of their sites from the SERPs.

## Conclusion

The truly complete guide to creating your website would take up more words than the Encyclopedia Britannica, so this has been only a summary of the overall techniques and tips. Taking the plunge to launching your business' Web presence is a major step, but by following the procedures and advice in this manual you may find that success is just around the corner!

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