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“Web Design with the Small Business in Mind”

Can I manage my website myself?

By TIM W. KNOX, Entrepreneur.com

Should you build and maintain your business Web site yourself or pay someone to do it for you? Let me answer your question with a couple of my own. **Number one:** Is building and maintaining Web sites the key focus of your business? **Number two:** Could your time be better spent doing more important things like, oh I don't know, running your business? If your answers were no and yes, respectively, then you have no business building and maintaining a Web site.

Remember this: Every minute you spend on tasks that are not related to the key focus of your business is time spent to the detriment of your business. In other words, every minute you spend focusing on tasks that do not contribute to the growth of your business and thereby increase your bottom line is time wasted.

If you want to be a Web designer, be a Web designer. However, if the key focus of your business is building widgets, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that your time would be better spent building widgets, not Web sites.

Case in point: I once had a very wealthy dentist ask if I could teach him how to maintain his Web site so he wouldn't have to pay me to do it. Now my teeth had helped put this guy's kids through college, but that didn't seem to matter. At that moment he was more concerned about having to pay for changes to his Web site than my personal oral hygiene. "Sure," I said, "I'll be glad to teach you how to update your Web site, just as soon as you teach me how to clean my own teeth so I don't have to pay you to do it." He got the point. And he charged me enough for the cleaning to keep his site updated for months. Smart man.

Many business owners think they can't afford a professionally designed Web site, and that simply is not true. While the old adage "You get what you pay for" is never truer than when applied to Web site design, having a professional Web designer do the work for you is money well spent. A well-designed Web site can bring you a many-fold return on your investment. You can't say that about too many other types of collateral.

While it is best to leave Web site design and maintenance to the experts, it is up to you (or someone considered a subject matter expert within your company) to provide the designer with the content (text and photographs) that best conveys your company's message to your customers. A Web site, no matter how well designed, is meaningless if it lacks the content required to interest customers in the products you sell or the services you provide.

Here are a few questions that, once answered, will help ensure that your Web site's message is as appealing as its design. Go over these points with the designer before the design process begins, as the answers will help determine the direction your Web site's design should take.

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What is the purpose of your Web site?

Most business Web sites have two purposes: (1) to educate the consumer and (2) to sell them products or services. If you sell shoes, for example, the purpose of your Web site is to educate potential customers on the quality and durability of your shoes and, as a result, to sell them shoes. If you paint houses, the purpose of your Web site is to educate homeowners on why your services are superior to other painters and sell them on hiring you to paint their house. By defining the purpose of your Web site, you will give the designer the information required to create a Web site that best conveys that purpose to your target audience.

Who is my target audience?

Your target audience consists of those folks you want to attract to your Web site: potential and current customers, future and current employees, possible investors and so on. Anyone who might be interested in your company and its products or services is a member of your target audience. Correctly identifying your target audience is vital, since your Web site should be designed specifically to appeal to your target audience.

Put yourself in their shoes (or in front of their computers). Imagine your Web site through their eyes. If you were visiting a Web site such as yours, what would you expect to find and what would you be disappointed not to find? Identify your target audience, and then have your Web site designed to fulfill their needs and surpass their expectations.

What content should my Web site feature?

Your Web site content should be driven by the nature of your business. If you're a real estate agent, your site should feature photographs of homes you have for sale and information on buying and selling a home. If you own an auto body shop, your site might feature before and after photographs of cars that you have repaired. Remember to determine the purpose of your site, and then develop the content to serve that purpose.

What's my competition doing?

The last question you should ask is one of the most important: What is your competition doing on the Web? Do a Google search for similar businesses and click around their Web sites. How are their Web sites designed? What message are they trying to convey? Are they doing a good job of conveying that message and, as a result, selling products? What do you like about their Web sites? What don't you like? Make note of the things you like and the things you hate, and then share your findings with your site designer.

Remember, you're not stealing trade secrets here. You're just borrowing ideas.

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