

SMALL BUSINESS WEBSITE BASICS

Overview

Having a website has become almost a requirement for small businesses. However, when it comes to setting up a website, there are so many options, choosing what to do is often confusing for a non-technical small or independent business owner. This guide is designed to take some of the mystery out of that decision process.

Why do you need a website?

Today, most small businesses need an online presence as much as they need a phone or mailbox. Customers and clients -- current and potential -- expect you to have one. For some small businesses, a website has become the primary selling tool -- a means to access inventory or collaborate on client projects. For other small businesses, a website is little more than a directory listing with static contact information. Other small businesses have launched constantly updated weblogs or detailed service-oriented resources. From simple to complex, websites have become a requirement for doing business in many industries.

In addition, most people begin their search for a product online using a search engine like Google, Yahoo or MSN. Having a website, [especially a web site that is designed to be an effective Internet marketing tool](#), can be very valuable for small businesses. Without the right web site, people will not be able to find your business.

Should you hire a developer or do it yourself?

Option 1: Do it yourself

PROS: You'll save money by doing it yourself, not to mention have complete control over the look and feel of the site. If you make yourself the administrator, you have the freedom to update and make changes whenever you feel it's necessary. If you have a working knowledge of basic web design there are free tools that will allow you to create a professional looking website on your own.

CONS: If you don't know much about computers and/or web design it could take a while to learn everything and get your site up and running. Also, if you choose to become an administrator, you will have to spend even more time dedicated to making any updates and changes to the site.

Option 2: Hire a developer

PROS: You will get a clean well designed web page in a short amount of time if you hire a web developer. Also, they will take care of any changes and updates in the future. A professional designer also will have the ability to create a completely unique site that is beyond the scope of what you could do yourself. Plus, it will give you more time to devote to the other responsibilities you have running your business.

CONS: You may not always have as much control over the outcome of your site. Also, some busy developers may take a while to get your site completed.

- The most important thing to remember about hiring a developer is to do your research. If you are going to pay the money, make sure you are going to get the result you want and in the time frame you expect.

How to determine what type of website you need

The vast array of options one has for setting up a website can add confusion to the process. One way to begin considering the options is to decide if your needs are simple or complex:

***Simple:** If your business is not web-based and you merely want a place on the web, there are many off-the-shelf, even free, products and services that may be all you need.

***Less simple:** If you are going to be selling products online and need to set up an e-commerce site, there are inexpensive and easy-to-set up products and services.

***Complex:** If your site is going to be the basis of an online business, then developing it may involve a great deal of time and resources to create and launch.

***Very complex:** If your site is going to contain vast amounts of content and data used in a specialized way, it will also require custom development to create and launch.

Selecting a domain name

Main article: [Domain name](#)

A domain name, sometimes called a URL, is the "web address" string of letters that will serve as a means for people to find your website. You can register your desired address easily through services called "domain registrars." Costs for registering a domain name can be just a few dollars per year, or, if you much purchase the name from someone who already controls it, many thousands of dollars. Coming up with a web address that has not be registered can be a challenge. Many of the obvious and short words and letter combinations have been registered. However, with a little creativity, you can still come up with

an address that will be appropriate for your business. Here are some suggestions for finding an appropriate website address for your business:

- The shorter the better. The longer the domain name, the easier it is for people to mistype your domain name and not find your website.
- Combine your company name with a city name
- Perhaps a zip code or telephone area code number can be combined with a word
- Consider dropping "silent" vowels - like Flickr.
- Add another word to your company name: "buy" "shop" "think" or other words may work
- Many registrar services will suggest alternative domain names if the one you want is taken.
- Choosing a domain name is very important because it remains constant. Domain names are sometimes referred to as "real estate" on the web. You might change your sites design many times, it's not as easy to change the name.
- You can "point" different domains to your site, you don't have to only have one.
- Consider using common keywords in your domain. Having these words in your domain makes it more likely people will find your business online. For instance, "www.mikesbreadbakery.com" is probably better than "www.mikesboulangerie.com" since more people will search on bread or baker or bakery than boulangerie (in English speaking countries at least).

Choosing a web hosting service

A simple website will only require a simple web-hosting solution. Often, the same company you use for Internet access will provide a simple website hosting plan as part of the service. As your needs become more complex, your hosting needs may also become more complex. The need for increased bandwidth (the capacity for sending and receiving data) and increased data storage may require a customized web-hosting arrangement. In other cases, you may want to purchase certain equipment and host the website at your location. For this guide, we assume you will only need a simple (perhaps even free) solution for hosting your website.