

Web Sites 101 part 1

9 essential tips on how to not get burned

Introduction

Has a customer asked you for your website address and you had to say “sorry I don’t have one”? Or, you reluctantly tell them, cringing because your site has a purple bunny background and you are in real estate? I am hoping this article will inspire you to find a web solution that fits your needs, and gives you the tools to get the website that will enhance your business. So next time someone asks you if you have a website you can proudly say “yes I do!”.

What do I need a website for?

Every business is different and the differences are even more extreme when discussing small business. The smaller it is the more it reflects the personality of the person running that business. It becomes an extension of them.

I have spoken to all sorts of business owners to family dentists who employ 10+ employees to businesses with one engine repair guy working out of his garage. Some love the computer and feel comfortable online and others are content to use handwritten paper ledgers, invoices and receipts to run their business just like they have been doing for the last 50years. The one thing they all have in common is the need for a website. Unfortunately many don’t understand the need, intimidated by the internet or have been burned so badly by a web designer they reject the whole industry.

What it all comes down to is every business is very different but each customer has roughly the same needs and wants. Filling those needs is the focus of every successful business in the world, small ones are no exception. So what is it that customers need?

1. Care-Every customer likes to feel good with every contact with your business. I.e... A friendly greeting, a smile, warm helpful service.
2. Acknowledgement- each customer needs to feel that their needs are valued.
3. Trust- A customer needs to feel like they can depend on you to be fair and honest
4. Control-Each customer needs to feel like they have a say in how things turn out. That we will work with them to their benefit.
5. Options-part of the need for control, having options makes it easier for them to make the best decision for themselves. Of course this only works if we freely share those options with customers
6. Information- A lot of times customers aren’t sure what they need or want or how to get it. So part of a business’s main job is educating your customers. We need to be an encyclopedia of helpful information for our customers.

Some of you may be shaking your heads at this point wondering what this has to do with websites. EVERYTHING! A well done website along with other handy internet tools like e-mail and social media can fulfill **every single one** of your customers' needs. The internet is filled with hundreds of thousands of potential customers just waiting for you to step up.

I know that just because you can make a beautiful 6 tiered wedding cake with sugar violets cascading down the side doesn't mean that you have the slightest clue about how to get online without getting burned. Thankfully it's no harder than making a cake. You simply need the recipe. And that is what this article is. A recipe for getting your business started online.

Thinking about doing it on your own? The Pros and Cons

Part of the genetic makeup of small business owners is a strong sense of independence. An attitude of "if you want it done right do it yourself" is almost a requirement for entrepreneurs. To tip my hat to the Do It Yourselfers of the business world here you go. A small list of the things you should ask yourself before you attempt to DIY a website.

1. Do I have a Computer? - If you are still going to the library to get online it might be cheaper to invest in a good web designer than to buy a decent computer.
2. Do I have the Computer skills necessary?- Being able to ' Google' is a good start but if that is all you can do you might want to rethink doing it yourself.
3. Do I understand internet Lingo and what they common terms mean?- Do you know what Domain, Hosting, Site Optimization, Search engines, Headers, Footers and Content mean? If you don't really understand the meaning of these words I would start looking these terms up. (Wikipedia is a good resource for basic information)
4. Have I done my Research? - Do I know what a dependable hosting company looks like? Do I know what software I want to use? How easy is this software to Learn? How much is it going to cost me to get my business online including domain names and hosting?
5. Do I have some basic design skills? - Seriously is matching your clothes difficult? Do you understand about contrast and color matching? Even templates can be destroyed because a business owner doesn't understand what colors are pleasing to the eye and which colors will give their customers migraines. Do you know how to visually balance the elements on your pages?
6. Do I have some basic understanding of business presentation- Do you know what parts of a page catch a customer's eye first, second and third? Do you understand the principals behind pulling customers through your site? Do you know how to visually present your product or service in the best light?

Now you have asked yourselves these questions let's look at the good bad and the ugly of doing it yourself.

Good:

- Control- we all love to stay in control of everything affecting our businesses. We don't like something we can change it whenever you want without speaking to anybody about it. It can make us feel much more secure about our website and we know exactly what we are getting.
- Price- If you spend the time to research and educate yourself properly you can have a nice website very cheaply. **Warning:** your investment in a website is going to be your time and your money. The ratio depends solely on how much you think your time is worth and whether or not that ratio is working for you.
- Fulfilling- Building a website can be a very rewarding experience. It can really help you understand your business and your customers if you put the time and effort into making it an effective website.
- Fun- Really, it can be very fun, even addicting. Creating your own business image on the web can be an exciting fun experience.

Bad:

- Time- There is a lot of time required to make a website work. Hours and hours and hours. If you don't believe me just ask anyone who has built their own site and maintains it.
- Money- Initial investment can be high. If you have an old Atari computer on your desk from 1985 you are going to need a new one. Buying web design software can be even more expensive than the new computer. If you use a 3rd party software you will pay monthly fees just to keep your site running, and it won't really belong to you.
- Frustration Factor- Have you ever wanted to punch your monitor or throw your CPU out the window? Unless you are bill gates plan on increasing that frustration by factors of twelve. When it comes to building websites nothing works the way it should all the time, so being a problem solver is a crucial skill.
- Limited Options- There is a cliché that says "you are only limited by your imagination". Well on the internet you are only limited by your knowledge. If your knowledge is small it is going to limit what you can do with your site. With a good web designer you have an expert who will be able to provide many more options for you than you might be able to be capable of on your own.

Ugly:

Uhhhhhhh... I believe it is better to have no site at all than an ugly one. It's like going to a business meeting in your jammies and fuzzy slippers. Who would do that? Unfortunately too often a business couldn't care less about how their business is presented online. It's like they think no one is going to care that they have so much bright red text on one page it looks like the page is bleeding or they have so many cutesy animated clipart graphics flashing all over each page that they need a warning label letting the public know their site may cause seizures. I have seen a few who not only posted inappropriate personal pictures on their business sites but it was completely eligible because the text was almost the exact color of the background. No way would a customer in their right mind find a picture of a man sitting in his lawn chair with his beer belly hanging out from under his stained shirt with one hand gripping a beer and the other down his pants on a website appealing, but it happens! So if you decide you want to do it yourself. Please do your homework. Ask the opinions of bluntly honest friends,

customers and strangers for their opinion of your site. One you are happy with it don't forget to keep it maintained.

Can't I ask my programmer friend to build my website?

I get this all the time, people confusing web designers with programmers and visa versa. They're simply not terms clearly defined in the general public psyche. Can a programmer be a web designer? Absolutely, can a web designer be programmer? Of course, but they are **not** the same thing. They are two very different fields requiring two very different sets of skills. A baker can be a mechanic but that doesn't mean you would necessarily go to the bakery to fix your Cadillac.

A Computer Programmer-

Someone who writes computer software. They understand one or many computer languages and use them to write programs and applications that allow the rest of us do things with our computer we might never be able to do otherwise.

A Web Designer-

Someone who designs websites. A good web designer understands the technical aspects of building, hosting, and maintain a website. Plus, they understand design and help a business create the best image to present on the web. A good web designer will also be able to create custom graphics and even edit your photos. They can be experts in a wide variety of design, website and animation software and applications.

I have an IT guru that works with me. He is brilliant he writes little programs for fun and he can networks 50 computers together and manage them all from his laptop, the stuff he does is amazing. He is the first to admit that while he can write a website in WordPad he is not a web designer and the work I do as a Web Designer is pretty amazing. He takes one look at my design software and begs to open WordPad. My Dream Weaver intimidates him as much as Command Prompt intimidates me. To sum up if you want a program written go to a programmer if you want a website built go to a web designer.

Hey, my Uncle is a web designer I will ask him to build my site.

First of all, does your uncle fit the definition of a web designer as stated above? If he doesn't you should keep looking. Just because he is your uncle doesn't mean a) he is a good web designer b) that he is interested in maintaining this website when he is done building it c) that he is dependable. All are absolutely essential requirements for your website. I am not saying you can't use Uncle Mike or your sister Sue. Just that you need to be able to expect the exact same things from them as you would any other web designer.

1. Experience- Does your uncle have any experience besides throwing up a Facebook page for mom's reading group. Any web designer you are considering should have a portfolio you can look at with working links to live websites. The websites should be attractive, accurate and easy to navigate.

2. Passion- Does he put as much love and attention into the websites he builds and manages like SpongeBob does when he makes crabby patties? He should love what he does, be anxious to share his passion and knowledge with you.
3. Dependability- Does your uncle complete projects in a timely manner? Does he show the same interest in your business and its success two year later the way he did the first day? Is his life such that you can rest easy knowing he is not going to take your money and flee the country without a word, taking access to your site files with him?
4. Honest- Is he upfront with you about what he can do for you and how much it is going to cost. Does he make a good faith effort to reach reasonable deadlines? Does he communicate regularly during projects? Is he upfront about any use of website templates? Does he know and follow copyright laws?

If the above requirements sound like your uncle, sister, brother, cousin, friend or Neighbor, then don't hesitate to hire them. I hear you saying " yeah ok uncle mike doesn't qualify he has gambling debts to loan sharks and his websites usually have more broken links then ones that work but he will do it for FREE!". If your uncle mike offered to be your business manager for your antique store and he declined a paycheck; and he was rude to the customers and left your store unlocked? Do you think having a manager willing to work for free such a good deal now? Your website is just as crucial part of your business as a storefront on Bourbon Street. You cannot afford to jeopardize your business by trusting someone with your website who will not treat it the way it needs to be treated. This is **your** business don't cripple it with the wrong web designer, Even if the web designer is your bff.

All Designers are not created equal

Any person with a computer and basic computer skills can set up shop as a web designer. They can and do charge up to thousands of dollars using free templates and canned or minimal content. Usually site optimization is nonexistent in such cases. How can these people get away with it? They prey on the average small business owners' ignorance. The internet is still the Wild West and there are too few sheriffs to keep people honest. So it is up to you to arm yourselves against scammers in web designers clothing.

Money is often the reason why more businesses don't invest in a site. They get one quote that scares them stupid and they assume all designers will charge them the same. Or, if they get a decent price they find they have bought into a money trap where the cost to maintain their new site is astronomical. It's not smart to stop at the first car lot you see and purchase the first car the salesman shows you. Don't do it with your website either. Get quotes from various reputable web designers. You have a whole world to choose from. With modern technology distance is not a contributing factor in getting an effective website your business can afford.

I have said this before education, education, education. Get comfortable using the internet to do research. Researching and studying about websites and designers is a big part of research and development for your business.

1. Look up terms you are unfamiliar with such as:
 - a. Links
 - b. SEO
 - c. URL
 - d. Domain
 - e. Hosting
 - f. Registration
 - g. Content Management Systems or CMS
2. Price web Services:
 - a. Hosting
 - b. Domain Registration
 - c. Domain Transfers
 - d. Website Designs
 - e. Website Templates
 - f. Website building programs
 - g. Content Management Systems
3. Network- Talking to friends family and complete strangers you meet at a diner can give you valuable information about what to look for. You will be surprised at how many people either know a web designer or have had an experience with one they are willing to share. Networking online and off can really benefit you and your business in your search for the right web designer.
4. When you find a prospective web designer whether online or off look carefully at the portfolio. Then ask yourself these questions
 - a. Do you like the work they have done for other clients
 - b. Is there any variety in styles and design
 - c. If there are links to live sites (there should be if they are a reputable web designer) check for broken links misaligned tables. Legible text and an easy to follow navigation structure. Basically you are looking for sloppy web design work. Be critical. **Warning:** Check you're zoom function in your web browser. If it is not set to 100 percent for the page and Text. Zooming especially text zoom can turn even Wal-Mart's Website into a freakish mess.
5. Interview web designers that you are interested in hiring just as if you were to hire a new employee. Your questions should include but not be limited to these.
 - a. Do you do custom work or do you use Templates?
 - b. Do you create your own custom graphics?
 - c. How long does a standard 4 page site usually take you to complete?
 - d. Are you able to do any sort of flash animation if so can I see examples?
 - e. Who holds the copyright for work I commission especially logos. **Warning:** make sure every designer you work with understands copyright law and follows it. It will help protect your commissioned work and your business from litigation.
 - f. How are they going to charge you, hourly, by project or will they allow payment plans? (If they charge hourly ask beforehand how many hours it usually takes for one page). Do not forget to ask about their prices for:

- 1)Graphics like logos and web ads.
- 2)Shopping Carts
- 3)Hosting
- 4)Domain Registration
- 5)Web Maintenance
- 6)Photo Editing
- 7)Flash Elements
- 8)Website Designs
- 9)Content Management Systems or CMS

You are the only one who can decide if the answers they give are right or wrong based on your previous research, needs and wants. You are the final judge on whether they are going to be a good fit for your business.

Don't forget to ask yourself a few questions before hiring a web designer.

1. Do I like them? If they have a negative or grating personality you might have problems working with them. You don't need that kind of energy in your business. A web designer should be a long-term member of your business team. They should enhance your business with an optimistic problem solving attitude.
2. Do I trust them? After interviewing them if you really listen to your gut you should get a sense if they are trustworthy.
3. Do they provide the services that I need now and in the future?
4. Can I really afford their services?

How much is too much?

You have read this article and are doing your research and you are surprised by the extreme differences in the prices of web designers and packages and programs, because the web design industry has no standardized pricing. It's not like going to the gas pump and you know instantly before you drive in if you are getting a good deal or not.

I just spoke with a client and a friend Monday who was telling me about his doctor friend who had just hired a web designer. This doctor is forking over 2,000 dollars for 2 pages! Unless the website includes a computer, 10 years of hosting and a year of website maintenance, his Doctor friend just got burned. My friend just shakes his head at the utter waste because he got a site from a Web Designer who designed a custom 4 page site that included two extra pages imbedded in the home page, 3 pages of product with pictures and a complete shopping cart. He paid less than 2,000 for his site, and he loves his site. For months after his websites completion he was proudly showing it to his friends, family and associates. It fits him and his business.

One of my clients is a dentist. She had a friend that offered to build her a site for \$400 dollars. It was 2 pages and she simply used a free online web design tool and paid for a cheap hosting service. She took a poor stock photo of a hot air balloon in the night sky as the background and started sticking black text

and a few small thumbnails all over this background. You couldn't read anything. It was a mess. My client was so ashamed of her site she never would tell people she had one if they asked. She felt uncomfortable confronting her friend about it. We told her she had gotten scammed, probably not intentionally by her friend but the result was the same. When she came to me she was fed up with the whole business. We were able to build a new site for her and restore her confidence. The moral of this story is. Don't fork your money over to anyone who hasn't proved their services are worth the prices they charge.

Just to give you a rough idea about pricing I will list some common services and reasonable price ranges. Of course actual prices vary dramatically but this should give you an idea so you can more easily avoid the web designer scammers.

1. Standard website pages: \$50-\$300 per page
2. Logos and trademarks: \$50-\$250
3. Special Web Graphics or Ads: \$25-\$300
4. Any sort of Animated Graphic: \$100-\$300
5. Flash animation with interaction: \$100-\$2,000
6. Hosting: \$4-\$60 a month
7. Domain Registration: \$4-\$60 per domain per year
8. Shopping Carts: \$25-\$100 per item listed

Now of course most web designers aren't going to break their quote or pricelist in such a way as above but you can still break it down yourself to see if you are really getting a good deal. When you receive a quote break the services down. We will pretend that a web designer sent us a quote for a one page site that included a custom logo and an animated flash header, one year of hosting and a domain they gave us a quote for \$500.00. We look at the above guide to help us determine if this quote is worth considering.

We simply list the items included in the quote like this using the high number.

Your Quote	Top Dollar	Savings
1 custom page	\$300	
Custom Logo	\$250	
Flash Header	\$300	
1 mo. Hosting	\$60	
1 yr. Domain	\$60	
\$500	\$970	\$470

We can see in this simple graph that this web designer's quote was well within a reasonable price range. If have done your homework on this web designer appropriately, this quote should help you make your final decision.

Maybe the quote is still out of your budget then there are ways you can cut costs without sacrificing quality or the needs of your business. A good web designer will work with you on payments and project scheduling. You might consider holding off on the flash header till you can afford it. And don't be afraid to negotiate. If they really want your business they should be willing to help you get what your business needs without draining your account.

I have been waiting for a year for my site and I don't know what to do.

Unless you have hired them to make a website like e-bay, Facebook or something equally complicated you have just gotten burned. Unfortunately this really happens to small business owners. They hire someone to build a site, and the designer never gets around to finishing it.

My advice is to **sever your business** with them as soon as possible. **Do not** pay them anymore money. If you have already paid them the total, demand your money back. Salvage what you can and do not look back.

It should not take longer than a month to get a clean professional 6 page site up and running. I personal can have a 4 pg. website online in less than a week. You also should take into consideration if it's the designers' day job or they design websites on the side. Another contributing factor that you will need to think about is how busy they are with other clients; you might be at the back of a long line.

When you find a web designer you **trust** ask for deadlines, and keep in regular communication with them. Provide information and content materials you want included in your site up front. You don't want to be the reason why the site is not getting done.

I always ask for half up front and the rest upon completion. That way I get the assurance that the client is serious and the client still has some power left in their hands. Each web designer is different, but I would hesitate paying the full amount before any work is accomplished.

What does a *good* site look like?

A good site has quite a few defining characteristics some of which I have already discussed earlier in this article. These characteristics should be present in **every single** professionally designed website. If you have a site that doesn't have all these characteristics than your site isn't going to give your business or your customers what they need. When you look through Web designers portfolios look for these characteristics. If they don't have them all, you need to keep looking.

1. Do the colors complement each other? Do the colors make you want to squint, look away or hit the back button? That is a good sign there was some poor color choices made. If you don't trust your own judgment ask the opinions of those whose opinions you trust who have a good eye.
2. Is the site legible? I know it's a little obvious, but if you can't read it your customers can't either. Be aware of the color of the text being too close to the color behind it and the font or style being too exotic or fancy to read.

3. Is it easy to navigate? If you can't find the page you are looking for, that is a good indicator of poor navigation.
4. Are all the links easy to identify and are they working? A local five star restaurant I know has a site with several broken links. There is no reason why a restaurant with such delicious cuisine can't expect their designer to manage their site properly.
5. Does the site draw you in? Do you want to want to click any of the links to browse or is your interest piqued enough to read the content on the page? If so they probably have a sense of good visual presentation and business marketing.
6. Is it neat and tidy? There shouldn't be any obvious flaws, overlapping of graphics, or misaligned tables. **Warning:** the zoom feature in your browser can screw up almost any website, so remember to check to see if you have your zoom and text zoom set at 100%. Also, keep in mind that different browsers and operating systems can display websites differently. **Small** differences in graphics and font are normal. A good web designer will be able to keep these changes to a bare minimum and may even eliminate them altogether.

Part of the job description of a good web designer is perfectionism. Of course mistakes are always going to be made but a good web designer will work hard to keep mistakes to a minimum and be willing to correct them immediately and without charging you extra for their own mistakes. They should also consider it their duty to help you avoid mistakes in any content you write or wish to add to your site. A generous use of photo editing skills and a spell checker are a must. They should also be honest enough with you to let you know when an idea you have for your site might be a waste of your money.

What kind of site should I have?

As you do your research you are going to see all kinds of website. Some are going to be custom websites, a few flash sites but most are going to be some variation of templates. Which should you choose? Well that is a question only you can answer. To help you decide I will lay out what I believe to be the pros and cons of all three

Templates

Pros:

1. Usually cheaper it's a good option if you need a simple or very large informational site.
2. These sites can be completed very quickly.
3. They are usually easier to design for a novice.

Cons:

1. You may find many sites just like yours all over the internet. It's not the best option if you are concerned with branding.
2. Depending on the template you could be very limited in what you can do with your site technically and design wise.

3. Site Optimization options can be limited

Custom

Pros:

1. You are only limited by your imagination and your web designer's skills.
2. You can create a highly dynamic and consistent branding strategy that can extend into your entire marketing strategy
3. Search engines love sites that are optimized properly for the internet, and sites that allow for a lot of flexibility will help you and your designer develop an effective strategy.

Cons:

1. Can be more expensive than a template site.
2. It can also take a bit more time to build a custom website.
3. More time working with your designer to get the site just right.

Flash

Pros:

1. I believe that flash sites are where the future is for web design. So if you have a full flash site you are ahead of the curve.
2. There is even more freedom when using flash to build a site than even with a custom website. It truly is a playground for your imagination.

Cons:

1. Once you have forked over a small fortune to build it you must continually pay top dollar to maintain it.
2. Flash maybe where web design is headed but it will be a while before it is a practical option for most businesses due to search engines being unable to read Flash.

Conclusion

Now that you have the recipe for getting your business a great website it's time to take the next step, action. Rome wasn't built in day and neither will your perfect website; But, if you educate yourself and put the long-term goals of your business as a priority you will find the doors of opportunity will open online and off. Success will be the inevitable result.

