

INFORMATION SERIES

E - C O M M E R C E F O R S M A L L B U S I N E S S

FACT SHEET # 2

THE WEBSITE: YOUR ONLINE STOREFRONT

While the Internet is much more than just the World Wide Web, this aspect of the Internet is where most e-commerce takes place. Therefore, establishing an effective online presence in practical terms means building and maintaining a great website, ie. one that encourages people to use it and works well with your existing business practices. One of the main advantages of web communications over printed media is that sites can be altered and updated as you go – this will give you the ability to alter offers or information daily, or even hourly, at minimal cost. This is the power of the internet at work.

Web sites are created by professionals called web designers or web developers. They can be found in the phone book, but referrals are always a better source of credible suppliers. Talk to friends or colleagues who have sites about who they might recommend.

This Fact Sheet offers some practical guidance on how you go about briefing a developer and developing a website – or doing one yourself if you are game.

PLAN AND BRIEF

When first dealing with the web developers who will do your work, or from whom you want a quote, provide a definitive design 'brief' (instructions to the designer). You should also request an itemised breakdown of hours and rates. Remember, you do get what you pay for, but without fully understanding both your requirements and the process to be undertaken, mistakes can be made if the communications between client and developer are not adequate.

In preparing a brief, start with some preliminary research, perhaps an analysis of what your competitors are doing. Clearly, you want your site to be at least as good as those competing for your market, so a review of other sites using an Internet search engine will help you to find out who is already offering your particular products or services, whether in Australia or overseas. This comparative review will also give you an idea of the functionality they offer, for example secure online payments, 'shopping carts', email bulletins, site search facilities etc.

The brief should also include background information on your business, the overall goals and objectives, timeline and key performance indicators. It should be written simply and avoiding the

use of business jargon. Consider everything you can think of (even allowing for future expansion if you can't afford to do it all now), but keep it succinct, clear and precise.

LOOK AND FEEL

'Look and feel' refers to the colours, appearance and usability of the site. It is an important consideration in site design and is what gives your site its uniqueness. The best sites are easy to use, offer good services and have an appealing, uncluttered, clean look. If you have an established visual identity for your business, eg a logo and corporate communications look and feel, your site will usually integrate that. Your design should also reflect the type of product or service you are offering, and it should appeal to your target market. For example, if you sell auto spares, a site that has an industrial feel is likely to be more appropriate than one with a woodgrain effect. The typeface used should similarly reflect the nature of your business. A competent designer with a clear brief will be best placed to advise you on this, but it does no harm to state your own preferences at the outset. Communicate this to the developer and show them samples of your existing marketing materials.

Having given the developer a clear brief, it is best to step back and let them exercise their creative freedom to develop a solution that fits the bill.

PROOFING AND PROGRESS PAYMENTS

As a matter of course, the developer should provide you with a design concept to give you the preliminary look and feel. They can load this on the Web for you to see online. You can then fine tune it as required. Various stages of the development process will require your signoff. Make sure you are happy with each stage before you agree to proceed to the next. While changes can be made, beyond a certain point they will be at your expense. The clearer your instructions to the developer are at the outset, the quicker and less costly your final product will be. If it is a large project, consider requiring staged payments upon completion of specific deliverables. This will give you confidence that you are getting what you bargained for.

BUDGET Before you approach a web design or development company you also need to have an idea of what you can afford to spend. Ask friends and colleagues who have websites what they believe is reasonable. Remember to allow for set-up and ongoing costs associated with the development and hosting of your site. Cost will be determined by a number of factors including size (ie. number of pages), complexity and functionality. Industry standard rates are anywhere between \$80 and \$200 per hour depending on the designer/developer. You will also need to allow for ongoing site maintenance and hosting. (See Hosting Fact Sheet).

A typical small business website can range from between \$2000 for a basic site including hosting and domain name, to over \$40,000 for an integrated e-commerce and business resource planning tool. Larger projects usually begin at around \$20,000, and quite easily push to 6 or 7 figures, given these projects are quite often integrated to existing (legacy) IT systems or core marketing activities.

If your project has the potential to increase revenues or reduce costs, then work on a return on investment (ROI) basis. This will enable you to allocate a budget that has a payback factor worked into it. Ideally, all commercial sites should do this. The extent to which they do can often be a matter of good measurement of returns so be sure to integrate into your businesses processes a way of tracking how much business your site is generating for you.

CONTENT Your content is vital to the success of your venture. By 'content' we mean the text and graphics on your site. They must be kept fresh if you want people to keep coming back. They must be compelling if you want to command their attention and move

them to action. This means you will have to make a

commitment to sourcing good content and ongoing editorial support. You can do this yourself if you have the necessary skills, otherwise you may need to subcontract it out. Your developer may be able to offer suggestions. Better still, have them design the site to include a 'content management system' so that a person without web design skills can edit the site using plain text or a word

processing program. This makes the insertion of new text or images very straightforward.

TEXT Writing for the web is a specific skill. There are plenty of sites that can give you tips on how to write for the web, but if writing is not your forte, use a professional. Remember, this is the voice talking to your customers. Badly written text, obvious spelling mistakes and confusing instructions will not create the impression you want.

GRAPHICS Some of the best sites involve the minimal use of graphics. The heavy use of graphics can make your site slow to load and frustrating to use. They can also look bad if not optimised to display correctly on web browsers – the programs people use to surf the web. Where graphics are used as navigational aids eg. “go here” button, they should carry alternative text tags to ensure that people who are unable to view graphics online can still move through your site. Your site design should be W3C compliant to ensure access by users with disabilities. The IIA has more information on this at www.iaa.net.au/awap.html

A NOTE ABOUT RIGHTS You cannot use text or graphics on your site that you haven’t created unless you have permission of the copyright holder. (See our Fact Sheet on Copyright for more on this.) You should also clarify with the developer who will own the copyright to the site itself. The fact that you are paying them to create it does not automatically mean that you own the copyright. Generally, in fact, the copyright remains with the person who does the creating. If this is an important consideration for you

(and it may be down the track), you should insist that the developers ‘assign’ their rights in the site to you as a condition

of the job. Make this clear at the outset though, not after the job is complete. Similarly, make sure it is you who controls the Domain Name (internet address for the site) if the developer is going to register that on your behalf.

MORE LEGAL THOUGHTS Your site should also have a Privacy Policy. Most users these days are concerned about protecting their personal information, and you

should be too. (See our Fact Sheet on Privacy.) Good sites these days always include a privacy statement. Have a look at some larger sites to get an idea of what is involved. You may also want to get some legal advice on this. While you are at it, you should also consider the Terms and Conditions of your site, and legal disclaimers to protect you from legal liability, as far as you are able to do this. Again, look at what other sites have done and get some advice from a lawyer who knows about these things. It need not be expensive, but could save you money in the long run. The Terms and Conditions must be obvious enough that users will have adequate notice of them. Otherwise they may not be of much use to you in the event of a dispute.

BUILDING A SITE YOURSELF

There are plenty of options available if you decide to build your site yourself. There are many, many resources online to help you learn how to design and develop your website. You can learn the basics of 'html' (the software language used to write web pages), image manipulation and submitting your site to search engines. There are also web authoring programs such as FrontPage and Dreamweaver that are easy for beginners to use.

If you'd rather become more proficient, take advantage of the short courses offered by many Universities and TAFE's. There are courses in web authoring, html, building your website from scratch and design for the web.

You can also get help at any stage of building your site. If you think you're over your head, get onto the Internet and find

some like-minded people who can help you with your queries.

You could join a newsgroup to ask questions about building your site. Remember, it's never too late to get help. While it may cost you more than you'd planned, sometimes it's worth calling in a professional to help you tweak the site at the end and check that everything will work as planned.

END WORD While there is a serious business reason for developing a website, the process can also be a lot of fun. If this is your first venture into online publishing, and you correctly manage the process and your costs, you are not likely to be disappointed with the result. You will be proud when you can direct customers to 'Visit our Website'.

MORE INFORMATION**Building a Site**

<http://www.dsiegel.com/tips>

<http://bcnetline.com>

<http://www.webdeveloper.com/design>

Accessible Web Design

<http://www.iaa.net.au/awap.html>

<http://www.visionaustralia.org.au>

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SERIES EDITORS

Christine Gill, Bruce Harris.

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Peter Coroneos

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