

How Building an Online Presence Can Boost Your Business

In today's high-tech informational age, getting a website up and running isn't the daunting prospect it once was. In a matter of clicks, anyone can secure their own spot in cyberspace—blogging moms, nationwide corporations, even the owner of the corner deli.

Which is why it's surprising that many owners of small businesses make the mistake of writing off a website as an unnecessary—and potentially costly—expense. They may assume they're not “big enough” to warrant the effort, or may be skeptical that they'll reap any substantive benefit. The truth is, whether you're selling candles or trying to drum up business for your new laundromat, the power of the Internet can be instrumental in taking the success of your business to a new level. More so than the telephone or the Yellow Pages, a well-executed website can catapult you into direct competition with the big guys. Simply stated, technology has leveled the playing field.

Below, we've compiled a quick list of some of the things an online presence can do for your small business:

Drum up business through SEO. If you have a well-crafted website with quality content that's rich in strategic keywords, you could find yourself suddenly thrust into single-digit rankings in the Yahoos and Googles of the world, translating into greater exposure and, ultimately, a boost in business and revenue. A website provides a free, round-the-clock marketing tool that requires little to no overhead.

Expedite account and bill payment. Bid adieu to the days of handwritten checks and postage expenses—a website provides you with an easy, cost-effective means of receiving and disbursing payments and reconciling invoices. Online account and bill payment has been proven as an effective strategy in shaping consumer habits and behavior in your favor, encouraging repeat website visits and engendering a sense of trust and credibility in your company.

Boost professionalism. One of the quickest ways to lose credibility in the eyes of a potential consumer is to admit that you don't have a website—or expose one that is amateurish. A clean, informative, easy-to-navigate site gives your business immediate clout and inspires confidence in your target audience.

Get your mission statement across. Your website provides the perfect forum for conveying what you're all about. This is your chance to tell would-be customers what sets you apart from your competitors.

Give customers an easy way to contact you. Including a quick and easy contact form on your website allows customers to get in touch with you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Plus, you can determine which pieces of information they're required to provide, ensuring more efficient and informative communications.

So, what next? Unless you happen to moonlight as a programmer or have a friend who designs websites, you'll need to find a company or freelancer to build one for you. The good news is, it doesn't have to be a terribly expensive or time-consuming ordeal. Below are some quick tips for making the process as productive and cost-effective as possible:

Outline your specific needs. Do you just need an informational website to convey the basic objectives of your business? Or will you be capturing sensitive financial information in custom forms? Implementing custom service applications such as online bill pay will likely drive up the cost of your investment.

Try freelance websites. There are some great online forums out there that serve as meeting places between freelance providers and those seeking services. Sites like www.elance.com, www.guru.com, and www.rentacoder.com allow you to post your project, then invite professionals to place bids on the work. Just be sure to check their references and portfolios before committing to a contract.

Check out your competitors. As a source of inspiration, visit the websites of businesses similar to yours to see how they're presenting content to consumers. This can be a great way to identify best practices you should adhere to for your particular industry.

Be clear about what you want. When describing your objectives to your chosen provider, you can't provide too much information. Web designers aren't mind readers—they need to know exactly how you envision your online presence. Create a detailed document outlining how your website should be laid out, any preferred color schemes, and examples of other websites you find appealing.

With today's proliferation of affordable web developers and "instant" website generators, the question is no longer why one should establish an online presence, but why *not*. Developing a well-designed, effective website can help catapult a small business into a new level of professionalism and exposure, serving as a cost-effective marketing tool that can boost productivity and profitability.