

Elements of a Website

These days, it seems everyone with a computer has a website. From mom-and-pop corner stores to Fortune 500 corporations, an online presence has become the virtual calling card of businesses across the country. With the bevy of affordable (or free) site publishing tools readily available, anyone can have a website up and running in less time than it takes to order lunch.

While it may be easy in theory, the fact remains that all sites are not created equal. To turn yours into a polished, professional branding tool that will build credibility in the eyes of your target market, start by focusing on these essential website elements:

Graphic Design

When it comes to maximizing your website's visual impact on visitors, no single factor is more important than graphic design. You might have the best sales copy ever written, but if it's not presented in an exciting, eye-catching manner, you'll be harder-pressed to turn browsers into buyers. Whenever possible, pair your online text with great imagery, logos, colors, and banners (without going overboard, of course). To prevent an amateurish site, it's a good idea to invest in a talented graphic designer with a trained eye and a proven track record.

Web Design

Anything that contributes to the front-end presentation of a website (the page that is shown to the consumer) falls into the web design arena. Encompassing a wide range of requirements, web design often overlaps into graphic design and programming tasks. After helping you plan the basic layout and structure of your site, a web designer will usually develop "mock-up" pages for you to review before back-end programming begins. Good web design is a critical factor in ensuring a polished, professional site.

Programming

Content and graphics may be the first thing people see when they visit your website, but without the necessary programming, they won't be able to do anything once they get there. Programming uses behind-the-scenes coding languages (HTML, PHP, ASP, and JavaScript are some of the most common) to give your site all of its functionality, telling it to display content in certain ways, link pages to one another, and run various applications. Once you've solidified the layout and design of your site, the programming work begins. Many web designers and graphic designers have programming skills, and vice versa.

Web Hosting

Once your website is designed and developed, you'll need to find a web host. Web hosting providers have a network of servers that are connected to the Internet. All of the

files associated with your website—HTML pages, graphics, style sheets, and so on—are stored on those servers, allowing them to be published on the web. There are thousands of hosting services available, many of which are very low cost or even free. Be careful, though: while it can be tempting to save money by going with the cheapest option, you may wind up sacrificing on quality of service. A good web hosting provider will ensure that your site runs quickly and reliably, and will address any issues in a prompt manner to minimize downtime.

Web Address (Domain Name)

The domain name of your website can be likened to your house's street address—it designates where your site lives on the Internet and how consumers can access it. Choose a web address that clearly conveys your product or service, and that supports your branding identity. Avoid lengthy domain names, as these will be harder for consumers to remember. Keep it short, sweet, and clear. If possible, try to incorporate some good SEO keyword phrases—this can help give your site a boost in search engine rankings when potential customers are seeking the product or service you offer.

Emails

One of the most powerful and widely used marketing mediums, email can be used to announce the release of a new product or service, offer a special promotion, provide editorial or instructive content, or gather important demographic information from consumers. But it goes both ways—your website should also provide your visitors with a mechanism to contact them with questions or suggestions. Your web hosting provider can activate an email account based on your domain name (i.e. info@amazon.com or sales@yahoo.com). Most hosting packages offer multiple email accounts for the same domain. If you include an embedded contact form on your website, it should route directly to your default email address.

SEO

Search Engine Optimization is one of the most important factors to consider when planning and designing your website. There are dozens of ways in which you can improve your site's rankings in Yahoo, Google, and other major engines. Some of the most effective strategies include keyword research, competitive analysis, paid search marketing (PPC), paid placement, search-friendly web design, and strategic link building.

E-Newsletters

As a cost-effective supplement to your online marketing efforts, an e-newsletter is a great way to establish a point of contact with customers who visit your website. Although the primary goal of electronic newsletters is to inform, they also double as highly effective sales tools, especially when you include subtle up-sells throughout the

content. Because of the instructive nature of e-newsletters, they also help boost the credibility and reputation of your business.