

Getting Started With Your Website: Eight Key Questions for Small Business Owners and Nonprofits

By Mary Headley

Feeling left behind because you're not on the Web? Thinking about the many benefits you could reap from being online? If so, this may be the time for you to create a Web site for your small business or nonprofit. However, before you dive in—whether you plan to hire a professional Web developer, do it yourself or use the high-school kid next door—you should answer a few key questions. The responses will help you decide how cost-effective a Web site is for your needs. If you do proceed, your answers also create the foundation for a solid plan. Though it takes time to think through these questions, working from a well-designed plan helps ensure an effective Web site, and saves you time and money in the long run.

1. Can you afford a Web site? Typical Web site costs include those for developing Web pages, updating them, paying for a domain name and “hosting” the Web site (putting your Web pages on a computer that makes them available on the Internet). The cost to create your Web pages can range from a few hundred to several thousand dollars, depending on your site's size and complexity (secure e-commerce and online database processing are much more expensive), as well as your developer's experience. If you know some HTML and your needs are simple, you might be able to find ready-made template pages on the Internet that you can adapt at a low cost. Costs to update Web pages, usually billed on an hourly basis, vary with the provider, but can be minimized by carefully structuring your Web site and learning how to do basic Web page edits and transfer files to your host computer. You'll probably want a “domain,” an easy-to-remember name for your Web site address, such as www.widgets.com for a business called Widgets, Inc. Domain names are “rented” by registering them (you'll need to make sure your chosen name is still available); annual fees can be as low as \$10 and are often bundled into Web site hosting fees. (For more information on domain names and a list of registrars, visit www.internic.net.) Hosting fees range from \$15 a month to hundreds, depending on whether optional services, such as e-commerce or programming support, are provided. Note that all these costs can vary widely, so after deciding what you need, comparison-shop to see if a Web site fits within your budget.

2. How solid are your reasons for a Web site? Brainstorm the many ways an online presence could help you. Typical reasons are to sell your products/services to a wider audience, establish credibility as an expert in your field, save printing costs by making documents or marketing collateral downloadable, save time by posting frequently-asked questions and answers, get listings in online industry directories, solicit donations or position your company/ product brand. Next, rank your reasons in order of importance and then list other means of meeting each objective and their costs. Finally, decide whether a Web site seems a better way to go for each objective, given the costs you estimated above. If you decide being online would likely help with your top objectives, go for it! However, it's critical you make these objectives obvious when visitors reach your site—and strategic locations on the screen, specific terminology and particular highlighting methods help make this happen.

3. Why would people visit your site? People may come to your Web site for reasons different from yours for creating it. For example, people often visit Web sites to get impartial information to help make a decision, how-to tips, coupons or subject-related articles. Besides meeting your objectives, your site should consider your readers' various needs and possibly have extra elements to attract potential customers. Even while addressing your own objectives, think of how to couch information in terms of what users get from you, rather than what you do (use “you” rather than “we” language). For example, saying “You can relax, knowing we've helped hundreds like you for over 20 years” is more engaging than “We have been in business for over 20 years.”

4. How much updating do you want to do? While planning what information to make available on your site, also think about how much effort you're willing to expend maintaining it. Static sites don't invite repeat visits and nothing kills a site quicker than habitually out-of-date information. On the other hand, keeping a site continuously updated can

be expensive, especially if you don't have the skills to do it yourself. You'll have to balance the tradeoff here to decide what level is right for your needs. One possible shortcut is to make highly volatile information, like prices or schedules, available as PDF files you can easily update using your word processing software.

5. Who is your target audience? Outline the important demographic characteristics of your current and desired users (such as age, educational level, gender, profession, psychological makeup) and what you think motivates them. Remember, you may have multiple audiences, with different needs and characteristics, using different parts of your site. This audience analysis will help you make design decisions (such as fonts and colors) and writing decisions (such as the reading level of your text), as well as technical decisions relating to the computer system your audience is likely using (size and type of monitor, Internet connection speed, browser software and version) and whether to use such enhanced Web capabilities as animation, sound or video. (Though many programmers and artists are enamored with fancy multimedia, unless it adds needed functionality to a Web site, such flashy effects are rarely appreciated by users annoyed by the extra time it takes these pages to display.)

6. What image or tone do you want to project? If your current logo and branding strategy are working well, you'll want to adapt them for the Web. If you don't have any or want to change them, start by making a list of adjectives to describe your organization—for example, conservative, leading-edge, classic, trendy, reliable, exciting, good-value, fun, sophisticated, down-to-earth. Be sure to also look at competitor sites to see what turns you on and off. Your Web site should express your own personal style, perception of your users' tastes and chosen branding. Having a clear picture of your target audience will help you select the appropriate sight and "sound" of your site. Web designers can also help you use the psychology of colors, shapes and images to create a fitting image, as well as tailor your copy's tone.

7. What distinguishes you from others in your field? For effective marketing, online or otherwise, you need to know why your customers buy your products/services as opposed to those of your competitors—be it lower cost, longer hours, customer support, value-added services or whatever. Can your Web site capitalize on these reasons in a prominent way, both visually and by inviting text copy? If not, you could easily be lost in the myriad of Web sites competing for your potential customers' attention.

8. What keyword phrases would you enter in a search engine if you were looking for similar products/services? It does you little good to have a Web site if people can't easily find it—and search engines are the most common way new users will discover yours. If you haven't already written an "elevator speech" (a concise and compelling description of what you do), now is the time to do it and highlight its key points. Brainstorm other possible keywords and phrases for your organization. Don't forget to consider geographic terms, since many people prefer to deal with local organizations. Some typical phrases might include "small business accountants in Longmont, Colorado" and "Pug dog breeders along Colorado Front Range." Try searching these keyword phrases to see if you find your competitors' sites; if not, determine what keyword phrases they are using and consider them as well. A Web developer can help you determine what phrases are best for your needs and make sure your site's language—both the text on the page and the hidden meta tags—conveys these phrases to optimize your search engine ranking (how high your site appears on the list of pages that are displayed after querying a search engine).

A well-crafted Web site is different from other print publications your organization may now be using for informational or promotional purposes. To be successful, your Web site must effectively blend elements from at least four types of documents: a rigorous business plan, a clear product or service fact sheet, a compelling advertisement and targeted Yellow Pages listings. Creating a successful and cost-effective Web site does take effort, but the good news is that once you've answered the questions above, some of the toughest part of your work is already done!

Mary Headley creates, redesigns and maintains Web sites through her business, Information Engineering Company (<http://www.inform-engine.com>). She believes this article describes information any Web developer would want to know before helping create your site (beware if a developer doesn't ask similar questions).

© 2005, Mary Headley, Information Engineering Company. All rights reserved.