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Critical elements in website success

Raise your hand if you have a website for your small business. Now keep it raised if it is generating a significant volume of prospects or sales. Not holding your hand up anymore? You are not alone.

Just a few years ago, small companies flocked to the web in droves, rushing to post their first website, anxious at the prospect of low-cost instant exposure. The web was going to be the great equalizer, putting small business on par with the big brand names, dangling the promise of visitors flocking to a company's site to purchase its wares or partake in its services. Sound familiar? Unfortunately, for most small businesses and organizations, the promise fell short and company sales did not skyrocket from an unending march of site visitors.

So, what happened? For one, the web quickly became ultra competitive. Millions of sites sprang up in every business category making it virtually impossible to be found in the search engines. What little bit of traffic the businesses may have enjoyed when the site was first launched began to dry up. Also, as the web evolved to become a more interactive user experience, it became more technologically complex and many small business websites did not keep up.

The other part of the problem was in the approach; not understanding that just putting together a website, even a pretty one, and finding some faceless company offering cheap web hosting services is not likely to make you the next great success story. A large hurdle that many small business owners and managers face is the tendency to compartmentalize the web into a few oversimplified tasks: grab a cheap domain name, find a budget small business website design and development person, look for some impossibly low-priced website hosting, and then expect their website to magically appear on page one of Google. Unfortunately, this ends up being a waste of time and money.

A Solutions-Based Approach with Professional Guidance

To create an effective web presence requires a solutions-based approach with clear ideas about what you want to accomplish and who the audience is you are targeting. The right elements have to be present; a well orchestrated website design with cohesive branding, solid technical acumen, clearly defined objectives for the organization, reliable small business web hosting services and some method of marketing your site and tracking the results.

The web is constantly evolving and search engine competition is fierce. Being successful on the web requires consistently evaluating the site's effectiveness based on your objectives, understanding the latest technologies and trends, having a dynamic website marketing plan and constantly fine tuning.

While you don't have to spend a fortune to create real value on the web, you should also be realistic. Understand that being successful will require an investment that you should plan for and a clear vision of how your website fits into the goals and objectives of the organization. If you don't have the experience and technical resources in-house, working with a professional web solutions provider, preferably

one specializing in small business web design and development can provide great benefits. A good starting point in the process is to have an understanding of the core elements that are part of a successful website strategy and how they fit together.



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The Elements of a Web Solution

1) Domain names – Choosing the right domain name is an important branding decision which impacts how your organization is perceived and also how it is found in the search engines. Purchasing from a cheap bulk registrar or choosing can spell trouble.

2) Website Design & Development Services – Find a provider that specializes in small business web design and development. An organization that offers a solutions-based approach can assist your company in doing thorough needs analysis and in designing all of the elements to work well together. First impressions count!

3) E-mail Management – E-mail is a key communication tool for your business. The right system will help you maximize communications within the company, on the road and with your customers.

4) Social Media – Social media such as blogging, Podcasting and other web 2.0 tools can greatly enhance customer communications. Your web services company should be able to help you evaluate how social media tools can best benefit your web presence and business objects.

5) Small Business Website Hosting Services – All web hosting is NOT created equal. There are many nuances and technical consideration involved with hosting solutions. It is best to stay away from budget hosting companies. Look for a managed hosting provider who can help you select the right plan for your web solution goals, get your website up and running and support you as it grows and evolves.

6) Website Maintenance – How will your site be maintained and updated? Having both small business web development and managed web site hosting as a package is immensely helpful for maximizing web server resources, identifying problems and keeping the site maintained and updated.

7) E-Commerce – Will you be actually selling on your site or using it for lead generation or information dissemination? If you are selling products, who will create and maintain your product database. How will transactions be handled? What about web server requirements? Working with a professional can help ensure you make the right choices for your e-commerce site.

8) Business Process Interaction (database development, customer relationship management, integration with your business management systems) – A website needs to be more than just an ad on the Internet to be effective as a business tool. There are many ways the web can be used to improve your business processes and integrate with your existing systems such as accounting or contact management.

9) Website Marketing – How will people find you on the web? Will you optimize your site for organic search or employ paid marketing techniques or a combination? What directories should you list your site in? Search engine marketing has evolved to be a complex specialty. It's critical that you understand the tools available for driving traffic to your site and if needed, know how to evaluate and engage a web marketing specialist.

10) Website Analytics and Conversion – Having a great site isn't enough if your visitors aren't doing what you intended; buying something, contacting your company or using your site for an information source. Does your site have usability issues? What kind of reporting will you use to track site visitors? What do you need to know and do to convert your visitors into action-takers?



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It's a Process and a Work in Progress

While there is certainly a lot to think about, creating the best possible website solution for your business doesn't have to be overwhelming. Your website can and should be a work in progress, evolving as your business grows. Because most small businesses do not have an internal IT staff to handle the technical elements of web development and planning, working with a web solutions provider that specializes in small business website hosting services and small business web design and development is a good start.

Such an organization can help you identify your goals, manage the technical aspects of your site and guide you in your marketing efforts. They can also help you work within your budget to develop a plan that combines all the elements into a cohesive whole for creating and maintaining a successful web presence.

Conclusion

The web has grown up to be a terrific marketing medium for small businesses and organizations. Done right, it can be the most cost effective and powerful marketing and communication tool in your arsenal. The promise is still there. However, to truly leverage the power of the web, it is important to take a good, hard look at the website you currently have or the one you are thinking about creating. The elements of a successful web presence: small business web hosting, website design and development and web marketing are only the framework for a well thought-out web solution designed to reach your customers and truly benefit your business.

Reference

Ilene Rosoff, The Launch Pad