

Web Sites 101

There's no doubt that the Internet offers tremendous opportunity to businesses of all sizes. It can be a great way to get your message, and/or your products and services, in front of a potentially worldwide audience. But before you can get all that exposure you need to take the first step: *you have to create a Web site.*

Web sites come in as many different shapes and sizes as the businesses and interest they represent.

- purely “informational” sites, often little more than a depository for new releases and brochures,
- “subject matter expert” sites, which seek to create an audience by providing search engine services or rich content on a particular topic or product set,
- And, there are the e-commerce sites, which allow customers to browse and buy products online in a virtual store.

Oftentimes, a Web site can be a combination of these three, or something altogether unique.

Despite the range of possibilities, there are very real limitations when designing and constructing a Web site. For instance, *bandwidth* – the amount of data that can be sent back and forth in a given period of time – is always at the premium, so Web site designers need to be stingy with the size and number of their graphic images. Also, there are a variety of Web site *browsers* and *plug-ins* available to users and Web site designers must often consider the “lowest common denominator” when constructing a site. And then there's the coding language itself, *HTML* (HyperText Markup Language), which can be a challenge because it was designed primarily for text-based communications.

Despite these limitations, or perhaps because of them, the technology market has found creative solutions around most of these problems, from compressed image file formats like JPEG to Java scripting for robust online applications. Since this article has its own limitations to consider, we'll stick to the basics here and focus on building small, relatively simple Web sites. In the near future, I hope to expand this conversation to more behind the scenes Web site design / layout and e-commerce technologies.

Who are you trying to attract?

Before you start building a Web site, it helps to set some realist *goals*.

- What do you want your Web site to accomplish?
- Are you looking to build a simple site that lists your capabilities, principals, clients and contact information?
- If so, that's where most small businesses begin.

Web sites can serve as online brochures that give interested parties an overview of your business, your capabilities and your experience. But Web sites can do so much more. The difference is that Web sites can be much more dynamic than brochures. They can take on a life of their own and become “organic brochures” that get updated from day-to-day or week-to-week. Also, Web sites reach customers in the right place at the right time – while they're interested in a subject or while they're in a buying frame of mind – which is difficult to do with other forms of marketing and advertising.

For instance, if you're in the consulting or services business, you may want to extend your Web site from a simple capabilities overview to a source of subject-matter expertise. More than a few entrepreneurs have taken advantage of the Web's wide reach to establish themselves as experts in a particular field. Of course, this tactic only works when you have the content to back up their claim, so be careful about biting off more than you can chew. However, if you were a networking consultant, for example, posting articles you've written on networking themes could bolster your business claims while attracting a large audience – and potential new clients – to your site.

At the deep end of the pool, there are the *e-commerce* sites: *Web sites that sell (and sometimes buy) products online using various layers of security technology and payment features such as credit card processing.* Building an e-commerce site can be a major undertaking, but with market research and a good business plan, e-commerce sites can take your business to a whole new level. Again, I'll keep this article in the K.I.S.S. format – (*Keep It Simple Steve*).

If you build it, they will come

Building a Web site isn't much different than laying out a brochure or magazine. You'll need to organize your Web site into various "pages," with each HTML document representing a single page. You'll probably want to start with an index page, which would also serve as the Home page for your Web site, followed by other "category" pages that link from the Home page. Categories could include an overview of Products, Services, Principals in the business, Contact information and even Links to other industry-related Web sites.

Once you've laid out your site, you'll decide whether you want to build the pages directly in HTML or with the aid of a Web site design tool like Microsoft® FrontPage™ or Adobe® GoLive™. If you choose to create the pages using HTML code, you may want to buy a good book that explains HTML coding (there are plenty to choose from) or take an adult education class or one offered by your local community. The good news about writing the HTML yourself is that you don't need to buy additional software to create simple Web pages; you can often use the word processing software that comes with your computer to create HTML pages.

For more advanced Web site designs, especially those with complex graphics, buying a software package like GoLive™ or FrontPage™ can put you on the fast track to flashy Web site. These programs often require little up-front knowledge of HTML, though learning to use the full palette of tools available with these programs may require some practice. Whatever path you choose, consistency is the key. Mixing and matching Web pages designed in several different programs is not recommended, though it is possible. And if all of this sounds daunting to you, remember that there are many Web hosting services and design agencies that specialize in building Web sites for their clients. Some even offer site design discounts if they're providing the Web hosting.

Now where does it all go?

Remember that the Internet is really a *wide, wide, wide, wide* area network. Just as in a network, there are file servers that "serve" content to various clients. If you want people to see the content of your Web site, you need to host it on a file server connected to the Internet. While you can choose to host your Web site yourself by placing the files on a secure server and connecting the server to the Internet through a high-bandwidth connection, that's more than most small businesses are willing to undertake. Fortunately, there are dozens of Web hosting companies

who can host your Web site for you, often for a nominal fee (Interland®, GoDaddy®, BCentral®, Yahoo!®, etc.). Hosting plans range in price depending on the amount of storage and bandwidth (i.e., amount of data sent back and forth) you need, but most offer a very affordable entry point for small businesses that don't require e-commerce services. Not all Web hosting companies are created equal, however, do your research before signing a one- or two-year contract with any hosting service provider.

If you elect to use a Web hosting service, you'll still need a way to upload files to your Internet site s you can add and update content. The fastest way to do this with an FTP (File Transfer Protocol) tool; there are commercially available FTP programs as well as shareware / freeware alternatives. Using an FTP tool is as simple as dragging and dropping files into a folder, and it allows you to share files between your PC and your remote Web server. All major hosting services allow file transfers of one kind or another.

But what kinds of files are appropriate for your Web site? Text files (noting that most word processing programs allow you to save files as HTML documents), JPEG digital images, Adobe PDF (Portable Document Format) files, video clips and animated graphics are some of the files you're most like to "FTP" to your Web host. Of course, you can add JavaScript applications and chat forums to your site as well, but that's generally for the advanced Web designer.

Where's the traffic?

So you've built your Web site, launched it on the Internet and no one's visiting it. Did you think your job was over? Part of your Web site strategy has to be the cultivation of an audience, whether you're targeting interested clients in your geographic area or readers from around the world. Just because your Web site is on the Internet doesn't mean it's visible to everyone. One way to gain visibility on the Web is by leveraging search engines to snag more visitors. Of the *hundreds* of search engines that exist, Yahoo!®, Google®, MSN™, and AltaVista® are the more popular ones available. In most cases, they are FREE – but for assistance and preferred search location, a nominal cost is placed on this additional service, or advertising with a search engine company to appear high among returned search engine "hits" for a particular term or topic.

Often adding your Web site to a search engine can be as simple as entering Meta tag descriptors for your Web pages (i.e., dog grooming service in Anytown should list "dog," "grooming" and "Anytown" among its Meta tag elements). Another good strategy for leveraging your Web site is to promote it to your customers by including your Web address (i.e., www.anytowngroom.com) on your business cards, letterhead, brochures and e-mail communications.

Which reminds me: for more information and products related to Web site creation, be sure to visit www.stevenefitch.com/Internet/

I hope to follow this article up real soon with additional pointers and information about the Internet, designing Web sites and security. Stay tune for more. . .

NOTE: not all Web sites are built in HTML; Microsoft's® Active Server Pages (.asp) and database-fed Web pages are also popular, but fall into the "advanced" category for the purposes of this article.