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Virtual Visibility

Create an Internet Presence With a Web Site

by Gary Michael Smith, Senior Member, STC Houston

Tired of handing out business cards just to provide your phone and fax numbers and e-mail address? Besides taking up space and being cumbersome to file, business cards can easily be lost; they may be best used to present one single most important bit of information about you and your services—a Web site address.

Face it—nearly everyone in the free world is online today. And increasingly, people are developing their own Web sites for anything from displaying wedding or vacation pictures to marketing services for an international company. It's much easier to bookmark the site in your Internet browser than it is to decide where to file a business card.

Stuart Halpryn, president of the Web Design and Developers Association, reminds us "For the individual, the Internet has shortened the distance between family and friends, allowing easy communication by e-mail, video conferencing, and even the latest technology, VOIP Telephone Communications." He continues, "The Internet has further closed the gap by allowing families to share pictures, videos, recipes, and about anything else from their family Web site."

Arguments have been made both for and against the use of Web sites for business marketing of products and services. One study found that similar operations, both using and not using Web sites, showed no appreciable variance in sales. However, Americans alone add approximately 2 million pages (of the 7.3 million globally) to the Web daily. Studies notwithstanding, you may find that having a Web site is a valuable asset to your business.

Halpryn assures "Leveling the playing field between businesses of all sizes, the Internet is the only venue that brings together buyers and sellers from all over the world with a click of the mouse." Jon Szymanski, cofounder with the American Web Developers' Association, gives examples of the "many ways to increase marketing efforts as well as cutting costs through an effective Web site. Some of the most popular are online newsletters, building e-mail databases, placing strategic ads throughout the site, and creating surveys for market research to name a few."

Uses

Although a Web site may be the last thing you've considered for your business—be it writing and editing, artwork and design, or any other service—consider this: with a Web site, your portfolio is available to the world day and night with little effort on your part, once you are online.

This means no more assembling writing clips or artwork samples and hand delivering or mailing to a potential client. Moreover, you may even be able to forego much of your expensive paper promotionals. Once you have an Internet presence, you are availing clients with as much information on your products and services as they could possibly need while you are also showing them that you are technologically savvy enough to market yourself virtually. Halpryn observes, "In an era of growing consumer convenience, there is a certain additional credibility, warranted or not, given to those businesses that have a polished Web site for their clients, as shown by the ever increasing numbers of online shoppers."

Szymanski reveals other cutting-edge uses. "One of the most unfolding marketing pieces now

coming to the forefront are online product demos and company presentations done with audio and flash animation that tell their story just like you [are] watching television.”

You may choose to include other professional experience such as client lists and testimonials. Adding your educational background may further instill a sense of confidence in your credentials. Just be sure to limit your personal information to your business; those with whom you are seeking to work really aren't interested in your family life, hobbies, or community involvement.

Another good use of a Web site is to contribute to others' knowledge in the field. For instance, you can provide available research information and links to professional organizations and other groups to help those in your field acquire information and network with specialists in the industry.

Creative Commercial Retailers

Retailers have long ago discovered the benefits of online marketing and sales. A study by Forrester Research found that customers who use three different methods to shop—brick and mortar stores, Web sites, and catalogs—spend approximately four times more than customers who use only one method. And those who use two of the three methods still spend two to three times more than those who use one method.

One growing trend in using the Web for shopping is “click and brick.” With this combined method, shoppers find what they want online, then pick up the item at the store, saving both shopping time and delivery time. The only time spent is online and the travel time to the store.

Then there is Louis Borders, who founded Borders Books in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1971. After putting his store online and selling to KMart, he moved on to other ventures. His Webvan Web-based grocery store cost him around a billion startup dollars and delivered groceries that were ordered online to shoppers in Chicago; Los Angeles; Orange County, CA; Portland, OR; San Diego, San Francisco, and Seattle. Although Webvan eventually went the way of Shoplink.com, it was perhaps was one or two decades ahead of its time, leaving the market to Peapod, HomeGrocer.com, and NetGrocer.com.

Now, Borders is attempting to sell content online with KeepMedia.com. With a \$4.95 per month or \$60 per year subscription, users can read new articles from an online archive, as well as stories going back 10 years. But Borders is not alone with competition from such services as Contentville.com and HighBeam Research.

Launching Into Cyberspace

To create your online presence, you first need to register your site's Internet address or domain name, otherwise known as a URL, which stands for Uniform Resource Locator. Registering a URL domain lists it in the Internet's official address book, which currently contains more than nine million names. URLs are registered through a domain name registrar, of which there are 386 as shown on Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers' (ICANN's) site.

The first domain registrar in the U.S. was Network Solutions, which reportedly is handing out 15,000 new domain names a day. This registrar and all others are under the purview of ICANN. This nonprofit corporation was formed to assume responsibility for Internet protocol address space allocation, protocol parameter assignment, domain name system management, and root server system management.

There is a fee for acquiring a domain name, and it varies among companies. Register.com, for instance, charges \$70 for the first 2 years and \$35 per year thereafter and offers numerous tools to create and manage your site. They also provide hosting services. Other sites such as Domainsite.com charge as little as \$7 per year but may offer fewer services.

Before registering a name, you must conduct a search to ensure that this domain is not already taken, and this can be done through your registrar. A Web site suffix such as .com (commercial) or .org (organization) will be assigned according to the use of the site. However, ICANN has made available new domain names with alternate Web address suffixes such as .info, .biz, .name, .pro, .museum, .coop, and .aero. Also, country-specific extensions—of which there are more than 200—may be assigned to your domain, such as .ky for the Cayman Islands, .vg for the British Virgin Islands, or .uk for the United Kingdom.

After registering your domain name, you should activate it through a Web hosting company. Your registrar may provide this service, or you can use your own Internet Service Provider (ISP). Prices for using a host's server may vary from \$8 to \$30 a month, and some hosts offer e-mail accounts with the domain name. Other Web hosting services such as Yahoo! Geocities provide free "personal" Web hosting, provided you don't mind all the display advertising and extra words in your URL.

Design Tips

Once you have activated your domain, you need to develop your Web site. Universities and some computer retailers offer classes on Web site design. They teach basics such as HTML programming and the use of Web design tools like Macromedia Dreamweaver and Microsoft FrontPage. Actually designing your site may be considered the easy part because using tools like FrontPage is similar to using Microsoft Word. Applying the proper code and formatting may require more time and expertise. Here are the three primary options for generating text for the Internet:

- Manually apply HTML coding as you create your Web site.
- Use standard word processing software and save your work as an HTML file.
- Use Web design software.

Web site developers can do all this for you, but their rates can be expensive at around \$85 an hour. Your Web host may have developers to design your site, and they may provide additional services such as monitoring the number of "hits" (visits to your site), performing statistical analysis, and gathering demographics information about those accessing your site.

If you decide to design your own Web site and don't have any formal training, a few points are worthy of mention. You want to be sure that your site does not overly burden the visitor while presenting you in a professional and aesthetically pleasing manner. Here are some tips.

- Resize or optimize photographs and other images to ensure that they load quickly.
- Until it is more widely used, stay away from special effects and other add-ons that require downloading specialty software onto the viewer's computer. In many cases, viewers will leave the site if they can't properly access it immediately.
- Never use dark text on a dark background.
- While you may be torn between a serif font such as Times and a sans serif font such as Arial, understand that an uppercase "I" and a lowercase "l" may be virtually indistinguishable without serifs: I, l.
- Display the actual URL on your site such as www.mysite.com and not just a link to the page's name such as My Site. If visitors print your information, a link will not be helpful.
- Consider using counters for both home pages and secondary pages to track what Web pages visitors are finding most useful.

E-Commerce

While many shoppers choose to use virtual bookstores instead of the brick and mortar counterparts, sellers also find cyberspace to be the perfect sales medium. Donna Snyder, chief executive officer of the American Association of Webmasters, states that "the World Wide Web has become the tool of choice for many who wish to reach new markets. . . it is always a treat to come across Web sites that operate as a one-stop virtual store."

You may decide to provide online ordering, but this is useful only if you either accept orders on a COD basis or if you accept credit cards. If you accept credit cards, be prepared to pay a fee charged by the card provider, which amounts to a percentage of each sale for your customers' use of their card and your use of their service, which includes ensuring that the credit card is valid and active.

If you require that all orders be prepaid by check or money order, a Web site will serve only as a marketing tool, not as a means by which buyers can place orders. However, you can provide an order form to be downloaded, printed out, and mailed to you via regular mail with payment. Customers can complete and submit such forms online if you accept credit cards. You may even choose to outsource billing services to a company such as PayPal. Look at online booksellers to see how this is done.

Finally

A Web site may be just what you need to jump start a sluggish business or to add some pizzazz to your current marketing and promotion. Just remember not to overuse visuals. Ensure that your site design is appropriate to your business.

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Resources for Quotations

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