

# Ask SCORE: Will a Web site help my business grow?

By Bob Anderson - Business Counselor

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**QUESTION:** I run a small business in the Naples area. Business has been steady, but not growing. I do not have a Web site; in fact I'm not very computer literate. Will a Web site actually help my business grow? Is setting up a Web site expensive? Do you have any other thoughts on using a Web site?

— **Joe N., Naples**

**ANSWER:** Joe, a Web site is a common, if not an expected business tool. There are more than 100 million Web sites in existence. Though you did not mention your type of business, allow me to share few Web site facts, common to most businesses.

A Web site can cost as little as \$10 per month if you set it up yourself. If you are not comfortable doing that, there are plenty of professionals who can help you design a site for your business. The costs range from \$500 to \$5,000 or more, depending upon the site functions. At the bottom of that price range would be a "static site." This would be an information only site that will help your customers know what to expect when doing business with you. It also has good potential for bringing in new customers.

Recognize that a Web site must grow as you grow. You can start with a rather inexpensive site, monitor the traffic (there are free tools to monitor traffic) and then start adding features as necessary. Web site developers can give you a price for the base site and breakout prices for additional options.

The costs will increase if communications (e.g. Contact Us forms) or transactions (e.g. Shopping Cart) and other complexities are added to the Web site. Keep in mind that the cost of sales for transactions conducted through the site could actually save you money, when compared to the overhead costs associated with a storefront, brick and mortar operation. If you decide to have communication capabilities as part of your Web site, you will need the discipline to answer the e-mail inquiries at least daily. Many Web sites have e-mail connections or links, yet the owner of the site never responds to that potential customer. This is like a sales clerk not acknowledging the customers in your store.

All Web sites (even static sites) need to be periodically updated. Again, you can do this yourself with easy-to-use software, or you can hire a professional to maintain the site. If you are going to have a site, you must update it periodically or your customers might choose to go elsewhere.

To decide if or what type of Web site you need, you must know your customers. Ask yourself will the customer base I target use or expect a Web site? Consider their age, economic level and what their shopping experience might look like. For example, if your

target customer market is under 30 years of age, a Web site probably makes good sense. The “NOW” generation has grown up with computers and appreciate the many conveniences they offer. It is also possible that some of your existing customers would not need or use your Web site. However, a site could attract new customers to your business and possibly broaden your geographical area of sales or service. Most studies indicate the benefits far outweigh the costs associated with developing and maintaining a Web site.

Joe, take notice of what your competition is doing? Do they have a Web site? If so, what do they provide on their site (static, e-mail, shopping)? If the competition does not have a Web site, can you derive some competitive advantage over them by having one?

Even if you decide against a Web site at this time, you still might consider buying a domain name or URL. They are inexpensive and there are many sites on which you can purchase your domain name. Search to see if the name you want is available and purchase it. Let’s say you want the name Joe’sFlowerStore.com and it is already taken; try other endings or add or dashes, like Joe’s- Flower-Store.com , or Joe’sFlowerStore.biz , etc. There will be a small annual cost to maintain ownership of the domain name until you are ready to use it. To learn more about creating and marketing a Web site, go to: [www.scorenaples.org/library/articlewebsite.pdf](http://www.scorenaples.org/library/articlewebsite.pdf) or [www.scorenaples.org/library](http://www.scorenaples.org/library) and click on “Web sites.”

To obtain business counseling, contact the Naples chapter of SCORE. Counseling is offered free of charge. The Naples SCORE business office is located at 900 Goodlette-Frank Road in the Fifth Third branch bank. Business hours are from 9 a.m. to noon, Mondays through Fridays. Appointments can be arranged by calling (239) 430-0081, or visit our Web site [www.scorenaples.org](http://www.scorenaples.org). Click on “request counseling NOW as a first time client,” then follow the instructions to fill out the “request for counseling form.”

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*If you would like the answer to your question considered for publication in this biweekly column, please fill out the form located at [www.scorenaples.org/askscore](http://www.scorenaples.org/askscore). Please include your name, address and a contact phone number.*