



A Step By Step Approach to Launching Your Business Website

By Gregory Nelson

With over 100 million websites on the Internet today, having an online presence for your business is rapidly becoming rather expected. Your website can be as simple as an online business card, as complex as driving every aspect of your business, or anything in between. A website can help you reach your customers more often and give you the competitive edge you need to succeed. By putting your website name on every piece of printed material (e.g. business cards, flyers, brochures, advertisements, letterhead and novelty items), you are creating the opportunity to showcase your business 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to anyone and everyone. You can create your own professional online presence for under \$100 per year.

Creating a successful website requires some advance planning. Start by looking at other websites looking for things you like and don't like. Look for use of colors as well as easy navigation and customer experience. Visit sites like www.toyota.com, www.landsend.com and www.amazon.com for ideas. If you're having trouble finding sites you don't like, try some choices listed at www.webpagesthatsuck.com. Also consider books on website design such as *Building a Website for Dummies* (ISBN 0-7645-7144-3) or *My Website is Better than Yours* (ISBN 0-9767569-0-0).

Next, determine what functionalities your website will host. This can vary greatly from site to site and may contain such things as basic contact and product/services information, e-commerce, self-serve customer support, educational materials, and communication tools (events, training, newsletters). Your site can be used as an advertising tool and as a mechanism to gain a competitive edge.

A decision must be made as to who will be actually developing your website. Will you do it yourself or will you hire it done? If you hire it done, be sure to get references and review sample work. Ask references not just if they were satisfied but also if their project was completed on-time and within budget. If you are contemplating developing your own site but haven't done it before, consider trying to create some web pages using a free tool or download a tool for a 30 day free trial. You can find a decent free HTML editor as well as inexpensive development tools at www.coffeecup.com or search for other tools at www.download.com. My personal favorite tool is Dreamweaver (www.adobe.com/products/dreamweaver) which, when purchased as the Studio suite, includes graphic and Flash movie editing tools as well. The total cost of website development should be included as a part of your overall business & marketing

If you hire a website developer, they will often want to choose the website hosting company. However, if you do your own development, you should select a hosting company who has a good reputation for online availability and customer support. Every hosting package includes different tools as well as disk space and traffic quotas. It is important to select one that meets all your needs. Some very good choices include www.bluehost.com, www.ixwebhosting.com and www.1and1.com (business or developer packages). Some of these hosting plans include the cost of the URL (your website name).

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The name of your website is important. It distinguishes your website from all others. The website name should be easy to remember and should relate to your company or your product(s). To check the availability of your website name, either go to your hosting company or check at www.checkdomain.com. While names that end in .com are still the most popular, .biz, .net and .org (for non-profits or organizations) are also good choices. If your website name is going to be a trademark, consider buying all extensions that you can as it is an inexpensive way to help protect your trademark.

If you will be accepting credit card payments on your site, you will need a merchant account and shopping cart software. Many merchant accounts have a flat fee per month (e.g. \$25) in addition to a small per transaction fee and a percent of sales fee. A much easier method which combines both secure transactions and shopping cart functionality is to open a PAYPAL account (www.paypal.com) where there is no monthly fee (the other fees are still there). Setting up an account is easy and they provide lots of reporting and other tools to help you get up and running fast.

When you start developing the first page for your website, create a template that can be used to create all new web pages. Consider using server side includes for web page elements that are common to all pages (e.g. header, footer and menu). **Tip:** Make sure your hosting company allows server side includes before signing up and learn about any special requirements (e.g. files must have a .shtml extension). Also consider using a CSS file to govern such things as font styles and sizes, colors, etc. so that if your tastes change, all web pages can be easily changed at once by simply making the appropriate change to one CSS file.

Some additional good design/development practices to keep in mind while you are developing your site are:

- The ALT= parameter on images allows a text description of a picture. This can help the sight impaired as well as search engines to understand your content;
- Use META tags KEYWORDS and DESCRIPTION to describe your site to search engines. Try to get a good ratio of words used in the text of the page for better search hits (also try to use these keywords in H1 and H2 html tags as well as in hyperlinks). Consider www.goodkeywords.com as a free tool to analyze your keywords;
- Use unique TITLES to describe each page;
- Use graphics to add a little spice to your pages. Images should be in JPG and GIF formats and they should be compact for fast loading (e.g. 5K-50K if possible);
- Use FLASH for video content as most computers have the plug-in;
- Update your site often to keep people coming back regularly;
- Validate your code for W3C website standards at <http://validator.w3.org/>; and
- Use spell check and test all changes to your site thoroughly.

While search engines regularly crawl the Internet, speed the process up by submitting your completed site to search engines. Some suggestions: www.google.com/addurl.htm, www.yahoo.com (suggest a site), <http://search.msn.com/docs/submit.aspx>, www.altavista.com, <http://dmoz.org/add.html>, and <http://submitit.bcentral.com/msnsubmit.htm>. If you are trying to improve your search engine placement, read <http://www.google.com/webmasters/> and consider getting a search engine optimization report at: www.firefactor.com.

Hopefully, this has given you a good introduction into creating your own website. For more details and tips, go to: www.scorenaples.org/library/website.pdf.



Gregory Nelson is the Vice Chairman of the Naples/Collier Chapter of SCORE (www.scorenaples.org) where he and about 50 fellow counselors provide free business mentoring to entrepreneurs.

OTHER RESOURCES *(some free and some not)*

ARTWORK

www.sxc.hu
www.1archive.com
www.coolnotions.com
www.dreslough.com/dee/index.html
www.jonathonart.com
www.graphicsattic.com/gahome.htm
www.theiowa.net/lindy
www.gettyimages.com

TRAINING

www.htmlcenter.com/tutorials
www.wdvl.com/Authoring/HTML/Intro
www.lynda.com
www.work.com
www.entrepreneur.com/ebusiness/howtoguides/index.html
www.entrepreneur.com/ebusiness/index.html