

A Guide to Creating a Digital Presence

It's an ever-evolving entity that starts with a well-thought-out website

Welcome to A Guide to Creating a Digital Presence, the first of two guides designed to help you create and optimize your web presence.

This initial guide focuses on the foundation of your digital presence, an effective website. According to a recent Discover Small Business Watch survey (April, 2010), Fifty-five percent of small business don't have a website.

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In this piece, readers will gain insight into how to build a website that is both effective and easy to navigate, become part of the online community, and ensure consistency across the various platforms that work to create a digital presence. *The second installment, Optimizing Your Digital Presence, will show readers how to strengthen their web presence in a structured and strategic way.*

Introduction: The Conversation Has Changed

It's hard to find a business that doesn't prize word-of-mouth. However, many small and medium businesses (SMBs) don't fully realize the extent to which word-of-mouth is now on the web. As customers prowl store aisles, they use their smart phones to check your products and prices against competitors. When someone needs a dentist, he is just as likely to go look online as he is to ask a friend. Before hiring an accountant, a potential customer will vet her by perusing some blogs she wrote about the latest financial topics.

"There has been a fundamental change in marketing from outbound to inbound," says Perry Alexander, Internet marketing consultant at Success Messenger Group. "Five or 10 years ago, everything was outbound—it was interruptive. It was TV and newspaper ads and telephone calls during supper, screaming to wrestle your attention away from what you were doing. In inbound marketing, you position yourself to be found in places where people are already looking for someone like you, where they are searching for information or having a conversation about your business."

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And that's a conversation you want to be in on. In the book, *ZMOT: Winning the Zero Moment of Truth*, authors Jim Lecinski and Google coined the term "the zero moment of truth," representing the point at which consumers make choices that affect the future of brands. Increasingly these decision moments are being made on mobile phones, laptops, and wired devices of all kinds. In rapid succession, creating a web presence has shifted from a nice-to-have to a crucial task to the fundamental way businesses of all size interact with customers and potential customers.

1. A Clear Need for a Clear Website

Even as the Internet has woven itself into the fabric of everyday life, a surprisingly large number of small businesses still don't even have their own website. This is despite the fact that more than 80 percent of SMBs with an online presence say their websites are essential to their companies' success, according to July, 2009 research by 1 &1 Internet, a web hosting firm.

Lisa Barone, the chief branding officer of Troy, New York-based Outspoken Media, ticks off some of the reasons that having a web page is crucial for most small businesses. It's a way to provide a full picture of your business (i.e., who you are, how long you've been in business, and what you specialize in). It encourages customers to provide you with their email addresses—one of the most powerful marketing channels for SMBs—in a way they won't if you just tweet, blog, or maintain a page on a social media site like Facebook. It gives people a place to link their website to, spreading your connections, and brand, around the globe.

While it's clear most small businesses need a website, there is also a need for websites to be clearer to people who visit them.

According to recent Nielsen statistics, the average duration of a web page view is one minute, six seconds (Nielsen Top US Web Trends, July 2011). Some visitors will determine the content doesn't meet their needs, but a large number flee because the site is simply too difficult to navigate. Clarity is a key aspect for developing a web presence for fidgety visitors who are just a click away from leaving.

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2. Keep It Simple, Yet Complete

This necessitates having clear links to important pages and a site map, which helps visitors instantly find the information they seek. “We try to maintain a clean, simple look without too much advertising,” says Willie Siavichay, a senior systems engineer at ACityDiscount, a Norcross, Georgia company that sells restaurant equipment and does 80 percent of its business online.

Even though the site’s layout is simple, it quickly guides the eye to plenty of buying opportunities. Large buttons announce, “Check Out Our Latest Used Equipment Purchases;” “Enroll Today in the Peach Points Reward Program;” “Free Shipping on Restaurant Hood Packages.” Because of the streamlined design with nice flourishes—like a large panel that rotates different deals—a staggering number of offers are made without overwhelming the visitor.

Visitors don’t want web pages blaring at them like a carnival at night with animated bullets, excessive animated graphics, busy backgrounds, multi-color text, and blaring music. Alexander recalls a small business website that was beautiful to look at but took too long to load because of the amount of graphics.

“Even if you tolerated the first page, you would be gone by the second,” he says. “It was a lovely feast for the eyes, but counterproductive because it was driven by the art director, not marketing.”

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3. Listen to Your Customers—And Then Tell Them What to Do

A web presence is a conversation, and in a worthwhile conversation you need to listen as well as talk. Your website itself should be designed in a way that shows you listen to your customers—and then you need to clearly tell them what you expect them to do.

Many companies are so immersed in their own business terms and jargon that it can be very difficult for the non-marketing professional to step back and look at their business from an outsider's perspective.

"You want to provide the content that your customers are looking for," Barone says. "If you're a local bakery, do your particular customers want recipes or nutritional information? Deciding that means listening to your customers."

Many websites provide useful information with an elegant design, but they forget to tell visitors what steps to take next—or as marketers would put it, calls to action. Whether you want visitors to sign up for an exclusive coupon or call on the phone for a price quote, you should clearly delineate what action you want them to take.

"If you tell people online what you expect them to do, there is a higher chance they'll do it," says Frederick Vallaeys, AdWords Evangelist at Google. "If you tell them to come to your site and download a white paper, they'll do it. If you just invite them to your site and leave them there, they won't know what to do."

Strong calls to action can be sprinkled throughout your site. Think in terms of "micro conversions" and "full conversions." A micro conversion is a step that moves a visitor closer to the ultimate goal—such as a button that says

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"Click for a Chance to Win a Free Consultation." A full conversion is when a visitor takes the desired action you seek, such as registering to win a consultation, subscribing to a newsletter, or buying a product.

One way to help get your site on track is Google Website Optimizer, a free website testing and optimization tool. It allows you to test whether new content or layouts on your site will increase your conversion rate. Companies find that subtle changes in a headline or adding a photo can have a significant impact on sales.

4. Assume It's a Trial-and-Error Process

A website isn't a work of art that you complete and hang on the wall. A website—like your web presence—is constantly evolving.

Take Petplan, one of the fastest-growing pet insurance providers in North America. The company launched its website in 2006, and during the next three years its revenues grew 2,100 percent, while it more than tripled its workforce. The company, headquartered in Philadelphia, continues to enjoy record-breaking growth in 2011.

"The moment the site went live, we knew 50 things we wanted to do for the next phase," says Chris Ashton, the company's co-CEO. "But if we tried to incorporate everything into the launch it never would have happened."

The original site grew up happenstance, and PetPlan's online magazine, *fetch!*, was added as an afterthought, making it look disjointed. The company recently redesigned the site in a way that allows material to be added more easily. Along the way, customers indicated new functionality they wanted, such as being able to change their address and update their credit card information manually on the site.

"All this stuff—blogs, tweets, the web itself—is exploding and it can be intimidating," says Laurie McCabe, partner at the SMB Group, a consulting firm in Northborough, Massachusetts. "But it's getting more and more important, and you shouldn't be afraid. Take it one step at a time."

Indeed, this is a preferable approach. "We learned that when customers come to our site and learn to navigate, they don't like surprises when they come back," Siavichay says. "We try to make little changes, and improve what we have, without forcing the customer to change."

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5. Realize the Internet is Local

One of the biggest mistakes small businesses make is to think that they don't need a web presence because they serve a local clientele. Research shows that 97 percent of consumers search online for nearby businesses—meaning almost everyone is turning to the web when they need to buy something in their own neighborhood. “If I have ants in my house, I go to the web to find someone local to deal with the problem,” McCabe says.

TheFreshDiet.com (TFD), an entirely online operation in Surfside, Florida that delivers gourmet food daily to customers in many major cities around North America, is a case in point. CEO Zalmi Duchman found that “using regional specific language and/or display URLs to create a more recognizable local face for the business also increased traffic.”

Location cues—such as lists of cities the company serves—are sprinkled liberally throughout the TFD site, including the “about” page, the “FAQ” page, and the “media page.” Even though TFD is an online company that services most of North America, Duchman learned that mentions of kitchens in specific cities resonates with customers—such as a time-lapse video of a day in the life of the Miami kitchen; pictures of the Los Angeles kitchen; a story about the cool graffiti art at the New York Kitchen.

“The local touch matters to customers,” Duchman says. “When we study how customers move around our site, we see added ROI that comes from a little personalization that might not seem obvious, like adding the picture of the chef in Dallas.”

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TFD uses other techniques to put a local spin on its far-flung operations: a Twitter account was created for each local kitchen or office; local daily deal sites are used; and Google Places helped it set up a local feel on the web in each delivery area.

Google Places, launched in 2010, allows business owners to supplement and verify information about their business and manage their presence on the search engine. After you claim your Google Places listing, you can add information like the hours of operation of your business, explain what areas you serve, provide videos and photos, and include real-time updates on sales and special events. Then you can access a dashboard to see how many times users saw and showed interest in your business listing as a local search result. The more information you include, the stronger connection you'll make with people who are searching for products and services like yours.

Other social media sites also give you options to localize your presence. Twitter Places, for example, allows you to tag tweets (short messages) with your business's location.

6. Change Is Good: Keep It Fresh

A common refrain these days is “every company is a publisher.” Companies of every size are producing blogs, videos, tweets, online magazines, and other materials that provide useful information and build a relationship with existing and potential customers.

“The biggest problem businesses have is they build a static website, and then they wonder why no one comes to it,” McCabe says. “Social media is exploding, and people will only come to your website if you are creating new and interesting things to see and read. The important thing is that you don’t simply toot your marketing horn, but offer people useful tips, tricks, and advice.”

Indeed, this was fundamental to PetPlan’s business strategy. When the company debuted in 2006, pet insurance was a thriving industry in Europe but little known in the United States. So it evolved a content-rich website with vet-authored pet health information, a branded monthly e-newsletter, and digital access to its quarterly health magazine, fetch! All of this helped people understand the benefits of the insurance products. An interactive “find-a-vet” feature, which utilizes a Google Maps API was another way the company established a meaningful digital presence that connected with customers.

Even the smallest companies have useful information to share. A plumber, for example, could create a short video on how to fix a leaky faucet, and then place it on his own site and on [YouTube](#) and other video-sharing sites.

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“There is a strong benefit to strong content, and video is becoming more and more important,” says Gary Hennerberg, Internet marketing consultant, Hennerberg Group, Inc. “If customers see what a landscape guy looks like and sounds like, they’re more confident about contacting him.”

Finding time to participate in the many forms of social media can be trying, but the businesses that do so say it provides a hefty payback. “With regards to social media, we are extremely aggressive, and content is key,” Duchman says. “From Facebook contests that give away free days of food, to tweeting about celebrities raving about our service; we own those platforms compared to our competitors. Our number of Followers and Fans far exceeds our rivals.”

The key is to be smart, but not overwhelm yourself. “The good news is, nothing needs to be fancy anymore,” McCabe says. “The biggest video hits are made on little flip cams. The biggest mistake is to be afraid to do it. If you have an idea, put something up and see what happens.”

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR DIGITAL PRESENCE

If you’re seeking tools to help maximize your digital presence, check [Google Business Solutions](#), a suite of services designed to help you reach the prospects and customers who are actively seeking you out. Find new customers with [Google AdWords](#); get your business listed with [Google Places](#); reach local customers with [AdWords Express](#); enhance your website with [Google Analytics](#) and [Website Optimizer](#); sell your products with [Product Search](#); and much more.

To learn more about the Google solutions designed to boost your digital presence, check out [Google Business Solutions](#).