

Ten Questions

Small Businesses Should Ask and Answer Before Starting a Website

by Paula Barker

So you're finally ready to begin thinking about launching a website? The task can seem daunting, but armed with a little information, you can meet your web designer without feeling like you're buying a new car. Think about the following questions, make a few lists, sketch out some ideas, then make that appointment! The advantages of owning a website will outweigh your reservations.

Hosting

HOW DO I CHOOSE A HOST?

Your website needs a place to reside on a server, and a host will rent this real estate to you. If your web designer recommends a hosting company, use them—they're probably competitively priced and may even provide freebies or perks due to their association with your designer. Most importantly, the designer has probably already done the research you would have had to do.

Alternatively, use the following criteria (at minimum) when shopping for a hosting company yourself:

- pricing
- support
- space
- visits tracking system

Pricing: The range is significant: between under \$25/month and up into the hundreds per month. Fair pricing for small business needs is approximately \$10-\$15/month or \$100-\$200/year.

Support: Certainly, 24/7 is ideal for technical support, and *is* available. Verify whether hosts will allow phone contact, as well as live chat and regular email. Online help documentation, FAQs and online tutorials are helpful, as well, but not enough when your website is in trouble. Some hosts promise 5-minute response commitments to email inquiries, which is the next-best solution after phone support or online chat.

Space: Truthfully, not that much space is necessary for most small businesses, so don't be sold by hosts offering huge amounts of space or bandwidth, reflected in their pricing. Most small-to-medium businesses use approximately five-to-ten megabytes of server space.

Visits tracking: The ability to track your visits is not the most important feature, but will allow you to ascertain the effectiveness of any marketing you put in place for the site. You will know if the number of visits went up just after a newspaper ad ran, for example. Or if you practice search engine optimization (SEO—to be discussed later), you can see effects of any actions taken.

Other criteria to consider when choosing a host are: number of email accounts, schedule of data backup, specific programming code support and FTP (or upload) access. Visit the following websites for competitive pricing and other features:

TOPHOSTS: www.tophosts.com

The Hosting Chart: www.thehostingchart.com

COMPARE Web Hosts: www.comparewebhosts.com/SmallBusinessWebHosting.asp



With so many names already taken, businesses must become most creative to devise short, easy-to-spell names characterizing their companies.

If your company name is unique, you can use *companyname.com*. If the business name is used by other companies, *companynamecityname* is an option. Also consider using keywords or keyword phrases as your domain name. Keywords are words a user might enter into a search engine when trying to locate a business like yours.

We The People, a legal documentation company located in Palo Alto, California, registered all of the following names: *wethepeoplepaloalto.com*, *wethepeople-bayarea.com* and *smartlegalhelp.net*. In doing so, they increased their searchability and ranking on the internet. (Please see *What is search engine optimization?*, Question 10.)

A good rule-of-thumb is to keep the name under ten characters, if possible, and by all means, try not to exceed 20. You want users to make it to your site easily.

The most common and desirable top-level domain (that is, the extension following the domain name) is still *.com*, however, since the dot-coms are running out, *.biz* is a good choice, as well. Other top-level domains are:

- *.net*
- *.org*
- *.gov*
- *.edu*
- *.mil*
- *.info*

Learn more about domain names at www.domainconquest.com/create/strategy.htm, where some very cool prefixes and suffixes are suggested, if you are struggling:

Prefixes:

123	abc	best	buy	cool	cyber
e	easy	ex	fast	great	hot
i	interactive	internet	my	net	virtual

Suffixes:

2000	2001	4less	andmore	biz
cafe	center	central	home	net
online	plus	portal	pro	shop
site	store	web	world	zone

After playing with several ideas, check whether the name is registered. Use the following sites (who also happen to register names or point to registrars):

For *.com*, *.net* and *.org*: www.networksolutions.com/en_US/whois/index.jhtml (VeriSign, Inc.)

For *.info*: www.afilias.info/whois_search (Afilias Limited)

For *.biz*: www.whois.biz (NeuLevel, Inc.)

Finally, the cost of a domain name should range between \$6.50 and \$35 per year. Not much distinguishes one registrar from another to justify charging more. Some differences between registrars are: research tools, time to process registrations and acceptable method of payment.

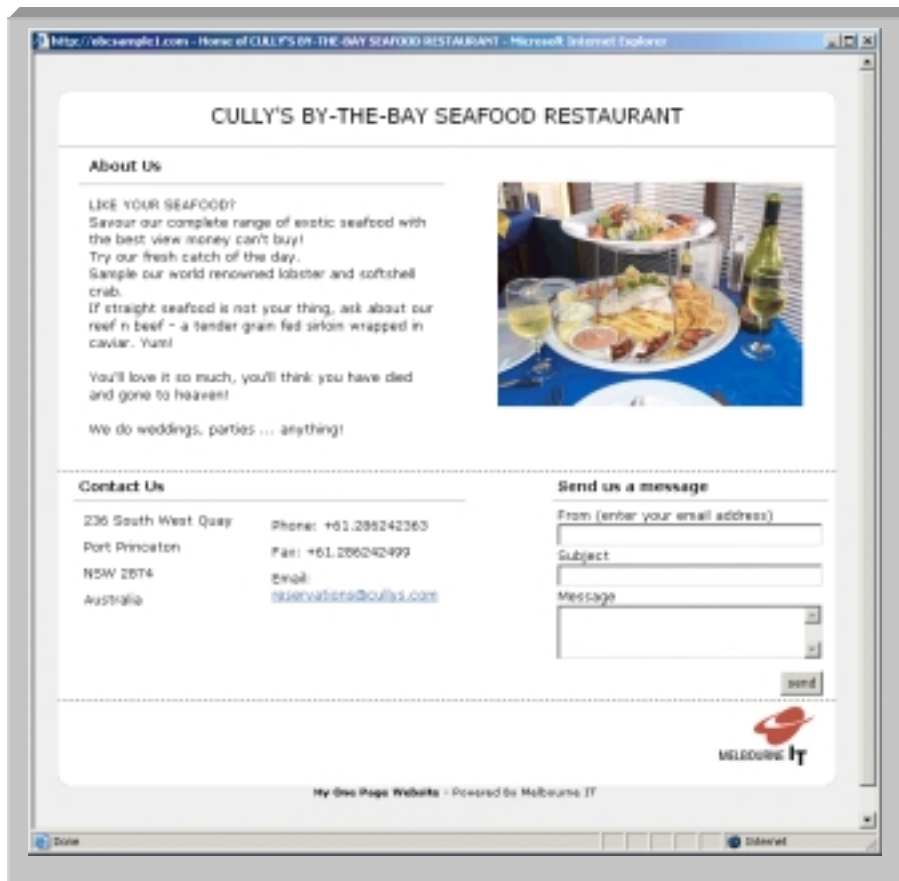
WHAT TYPES OF WEBSITES ARE AVAILABLE?

The type of website you decide to create will depend on your budget and your purpose for the site. The types are distinguished by size and desired interactivity level: single-page, brochure, communication and e-commerce.

Single-page site: These sites can be extremely simple and inexpensive, and if well designed, can look as professional as any other, larger website. You have, minimally, given your company a web presence.

Items that are musts for a one-page site:

- business logo
- business name
- contact info
- brief description of your business



The designer of this one-page site managed to do a lot with a little, even adding an interactive form.

Brochure site: If you have much more information you would like to provide, brochure sites are from three-to-eight pages and can also be simple and inexpensive. The objective is to provide information about the business, increase interest and encourage contact, but there is little, if any, interactivity. The required items are everything listed for the one-page site, but the information is divided into several categories, depending on what your company offers. Typical sections for a service company would be *Who We Are*, *Services We Offer*, *Services Detail*, *Contact Us*, and so

forth. However, please see *How Should I Organize and Plan My Site*, Question 8 for more on site categories and sections.

Brochure site. Design by article author, Paula Barker.

Communication site: For greater user participation, designers can provide sites that include message boards, chat rooms, an online calendar and event photos. These sites tend to be ten pages or more, are more costly to set up *and* require ongoing maintenance. In many instances, this type of site is used for clubs and communities. Yahoo Groups sites are a prime example.

Communication site: Note at left the message board, ability to post, photos and calendar.

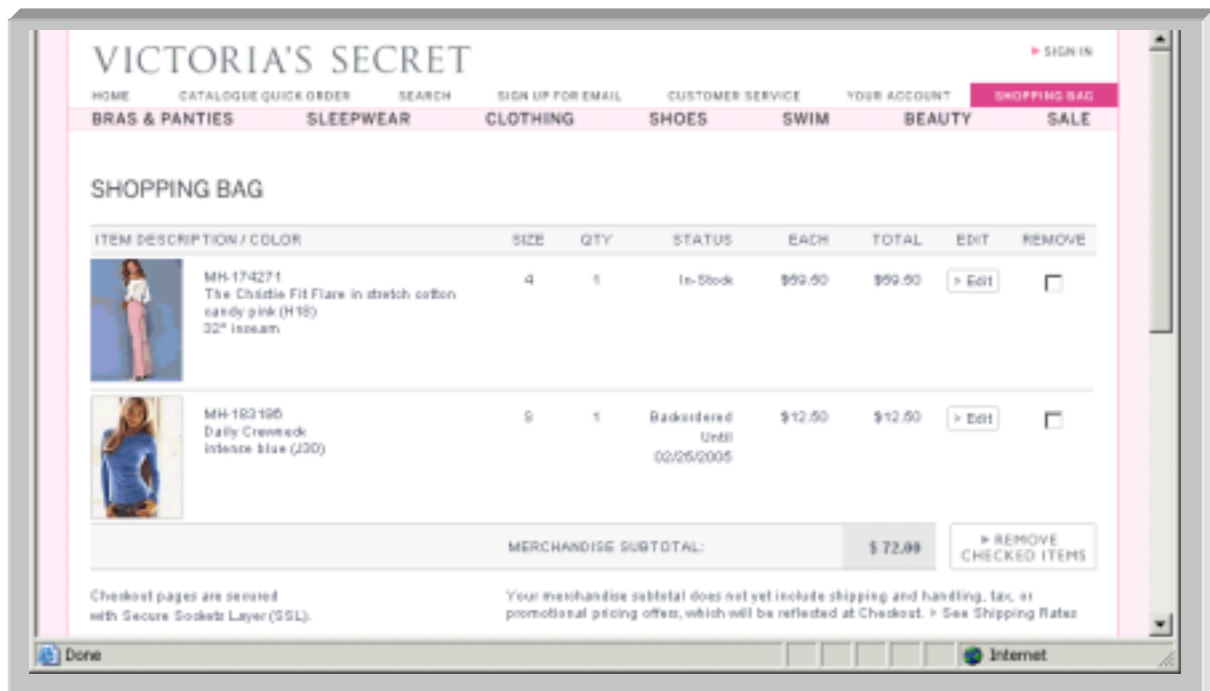
E-commerce site: The advantages of creating online stores to small businesses are:

- decrease in marketing expenses
- increase in sales
- the appearance of being a larger business

E-commerce sites are database driven and searchable. A database-driven website is one that uses a database to gather, display or manipulate information. Simple versions run from 3-20 pages, and an online catalog site would range from 10-500+ pages!

If contemplating whether to create an e-commerce site, refer to *So, You Want An Ecommerce Site*, by Larisa Thomason, www.netmechanic.com/news/vol4/design_no2.htm, who, compels you ask yourself the following four questions:

1. Will I use an off-the-shelf shopping cart system or design my own?
2. How will I accept payment from customers?
3. What type of database do I want to use?
4. Will my web host support the answers to the first three questions?



A nice example of a shopping cart on an e-commerce site.

Pricing

HOW MUCH SHOULD I EXPECT TO SPEND ON MY WEBSITE?

Different types of websites cover different price ranges.

One-page sites: \$250 on up, depending on complexity, use of Flash or other multimedia.

Brochure sites: \$500 on up.

Template sites: from in the \$20s to over \$2000. (Templates are covered in the next question.)

E-commerce sites: from several hundred to thousands of dollars, depending on the scope of the project. Andrew Lehman Design, at <http://andrewlehman.com/e-commerce.html>, showcases examples of their shopping cart sites, with pricing ranging from \$1000 to \$12,000.

SHOULD I USE A TEMPLATE AND DO IT MYSELF?

On the face of it, using a template may seem like the way to go. Many are low-cost, look great and content on some can be easily changed. You can even pay a premium to guarantee you will be the last company to use a particular template. For example, one template that normally sells for \$65 becomes \$2025 after you purchase the right to make it unique to you. See www.templatemonster.com. Other template sites promise to retire certain templates after a set, low number of purchases, like ten, for example.

You need a certain amount of computer savvy to work with website templates, but some are so sophisticated now that anyone can use them. These are called *intelligent templates*—content is easier to change since the programming literally separates the design from the content.

The drawbacks are that templates can obviously look like other websites, you generally get little or no support, and you have to do the work. It's up to you.



An attractive example of a template site from www.templatemonster.com.

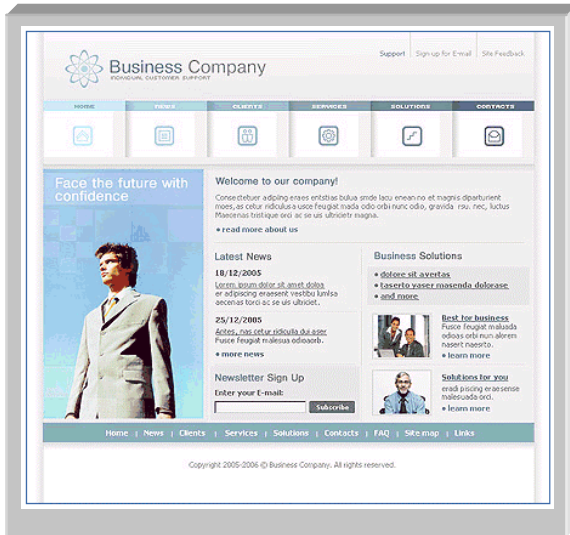
Image

WHAT IMAGE AM I TRYING TO PROJECT?

...and do I really need a website to project this image? Well, a website will be one more medium for reinforcing the image you already project with your corporate identity and printed materials. But, as stated previously, an online presence can further enhance your persona and make you appear larger.

If you prefer, your site can also make you appear friendly and intimate through use of personal photos, building photos and descriptions of personnel. The style you choose can evoke a number of moods: formal, informal, fun, stylized, classic, business-like but friendly, affordable vs. expensive.

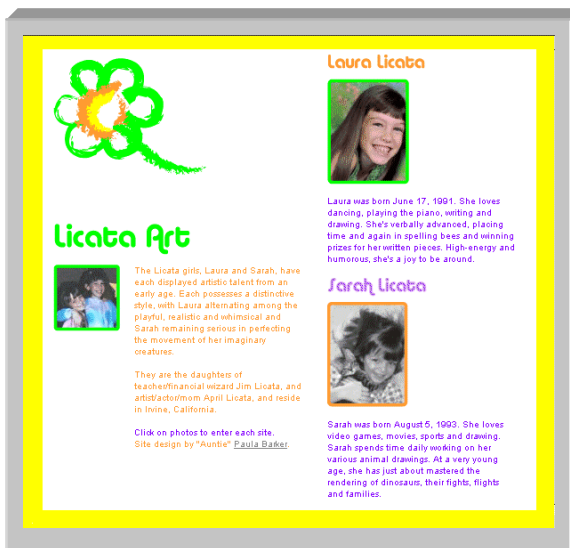
Nothing works to illustrate some of these styles like pictures:



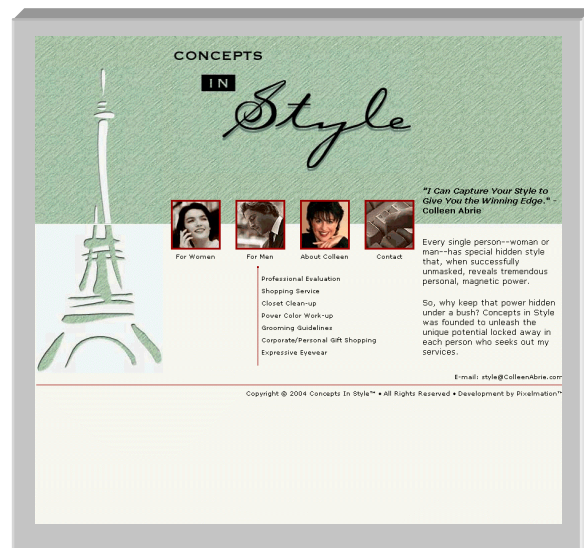
Formal: from templatemonster.com; its formality does not detract from its beauty



Informal: from careerbuilder.com



Fun: Design by article author, Paula Barker
www.pbdesigns.net/home/laursarh/home.htm



Stylized: from www.colleenabrie.com

Your first thoughts may be what you want your website to do for you, but more importantly, you should think about what it can do for your users. Ponder the following from your visitors' points of view:

- I want to know...
- I need to know...
- The problem I need to solve is...
- I can make a decision if I know...
- This other, competing company charges \$X.00. If I can find pricing on this site, I might stay a while...

An interesting technique to design a site from the audience's point of view is called *persona-based design*. Researchers study daily routines including website habits of current and potential customers, then draw up a few distinct customer profiles, called *personas*. The web designers then use these personas to guide the design or redesign of a website's navigation. For a specific example of personas in use and their positive results, see the following article: *How to Play to Your Audience*. Subtitle: *Is your website easy for Maude to use? Or, for that matter, Tiffany or Raul? Here's how to sync up your website with your audience*, by Meridith Levinson www.cio.com/archive/111503/play.html, from the 11/15/03 issue of *CIO Magazine*.

Although, you generally won't have to go this far to design your site properly, knowing the process exists will reinforce your thinking towards your specific user. As the article states, "...the purpose of the personas is to get everyone thinking in a unified way from a user's perspective."

Something you can accomplish with fewer professionals involved is the creation of a small character sketch of one of your potential customers by defining the following aspects:

- age
- sex
- economic level
- interests
- computer equipment they might own (speed of modem, etc.)
- geographic location
- reasons for coming to your site

Then, consider this person's wants and needs when having your site designed. Develop several of these character sketches and use all perspectives to construct the best, all-round navigation.

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW, TO KNOW HOW TO PLAN?

- What elements must be on the site
- What sections should be on the site
- Who should be responsible for each section on the site

Site elements:

AT MINIMUM:	logo, business name, description of business, contact info
IMPORTANT:	links, buttons, graphics, product photos, product descriptions, product/service pricing, list of services
ADVANTAGEOUS:	map/directions to location, online contact forms, online store, search feature, about us, personnel or management credentials/highlights, site map, portfolio of work, client list, help feature, press releases
FRILLS ONLY:	Flash or other multimedia, sound, calendar of events, chat or message boards

Site Sections:

Once you have the desired elements listed, you can then organize the site into sections, or ask the website designer to do this for you. Typical segments are as follows:

HOME:	introductory page describing the business and summing up what will appear on the remainder of the site
SERVICES:	page(s) describing the services offered by the business; these can be further broken down into subsections, depending on the complexity of your service business
PRODUCTS:	page(s) describing products sold by the business, sometimes with pricing and photos; as with services, products can be broken into subsections
ABOUT US:	page describing the business, mission and/or key personnel
CONTACT US:	page with phone numbers, email addresses, mailing addresses, etc.
SITE MAP:	page(s) that lists all or most of the pages on a website, sometimes with their relationship to each other

Needless to say, other sections will be added depending on whether the site is an e-commerce site or communication type, etc. Many websites now also include privacy policies and terms and conditions statements.

Site Delegation:

Assign expert personnel to write and edit the content of the different sections. You can also hire a writer/editor, and some web designers write content, but will add the writing to their estimate at an hourly rate.

The text should be short—written like a journalist, as visitors don't want to spend a long time on each page.

TYPES OF SITE ORGANIZATION

You can either leave the organization to your web designer, who has experience in the different ways of managing site information, or reflect on your own solution to save on the designer's time and cost to you. Sketch out your ideas and imagine you are the user of your site when creating the logic.

Two main types of website organization exist: linear and non-linear.

Linear:

Linear sites consist of series of pages, one leading to another. Tutorial sites employ this sequential construction, as shown in Chart 1. Chart 2 provides specific information flow ideas for a somewhat linear store site.

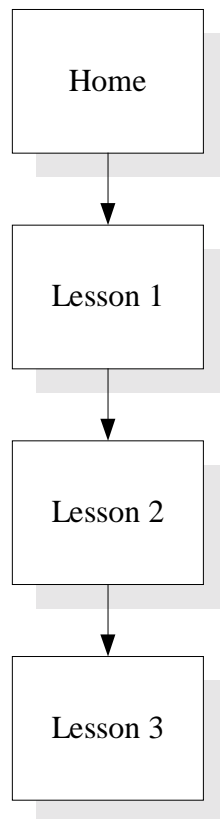


Chart 1: Linear flow

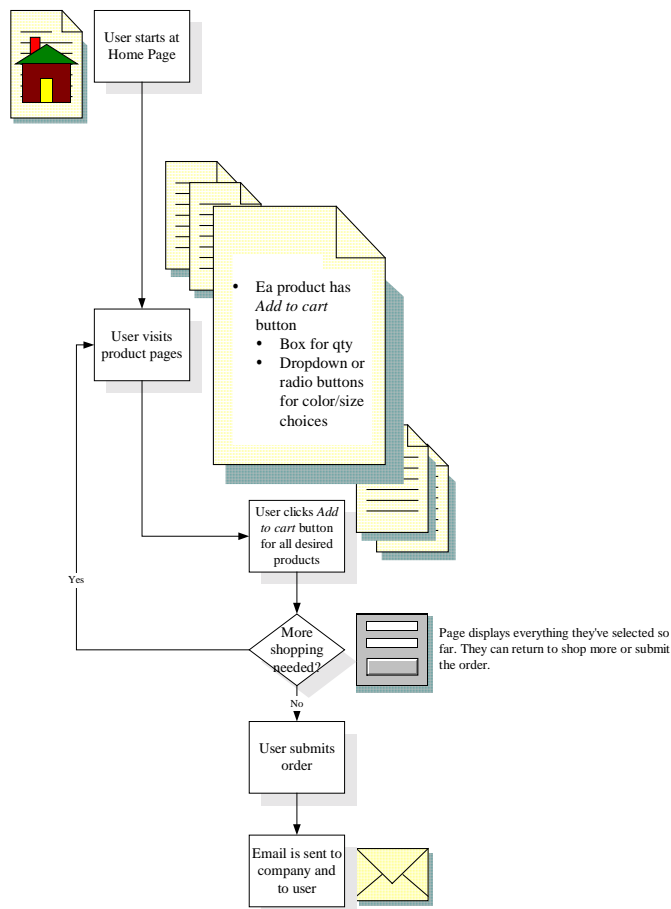
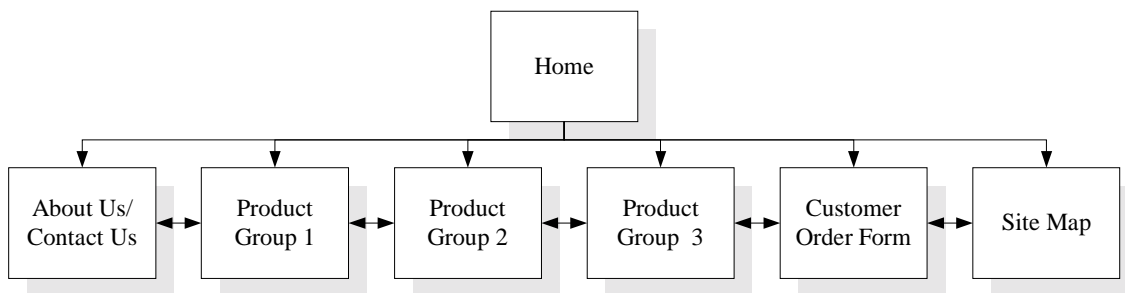


Chart 2: somewhat linear, with ability to revisit pages

Non-linear:

Most small businesses use a non-linear format for to their sites. Access to each page is available from any other page. Generally, each section or category of the site, determined earlier in your planning, would be represented by a button and a page.

Construct a menu plan with buttons or links to each section/category/page. Chart 3 expresses a general non-linear flow labeled with examples of page content.



All pages can link to all other pages

Chart 3: Non-linear flow

Your website address must appear on every bit of printed material you distribute: business cards, envelopes, brochures, flyers, etc.

Run marketing campaigns with the website address appearing prominently:

- newspaper ads
- email ads
- direct mail
- press releases

Newspaper ads:

You can ascertain the effectiveness of running a newspaper ad if you procure a site visits tracking system with your website hosting package. Compare daily averages to the day *following* an ad.

Email ads:

Some slick, easy packages have emerged for creating professional-looking email ads. Try MicroSoft bCentral by visiting: www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/products/online/lb/detail.aspx and click on *List Builder*. Alternatively, see the Vertical Response site: www.verticalresponse.com and use their iBuilder marketing feature. Both companies provide email list management, as well as designer templates for your ads. You can also custom design your email ad and upload to their sites.

Direct mail:

As with any other form of advertising, be sure to include your web address on any direct mail pieces, and track responses.

Press Releases:

Send online and offline press releases regarding your business and including your website address on a regular basis. Incorporate any news or events, legal changes, local event participation, etc. When tracking your site visits, you should experience a boost after these press releases run.

Most importantly, work on search engine optimization (SEO). SEO is covered extensively in our next question.

Search Engine Optimization is taking action to maximize your site's chance of ranking higher in the search engines, the key to exposure for your website.

At this writing, the major search engines to target are Google, MSN and Yahoo. Other players are Alexa, BigFinder, EntireWeb, Jayde, Moodule, ScrubTheWeb, Search-It, SearchSight, SurfGopher, TurnPike and Walhello.

Generally, the crucial items that will get you high ranking are keywords, keyword phrases and their proper placement within the text, page headers, image file names, alt tags and the HTML

code itself. These keywords should be researched and perhaps changed, periodically. This research and updating is a service you can pay others to do for you at nominal monthly rates.

In addition, periodic submission of your site to the search engines is necessary; however avoid paying for automated submission. Each search engine has its own submission acceptance rules, so it's best if a human being is performing manual submissions. With regular submissions, you tell the engines that your are a viable website contending for competitive ranking.

Although securing top ranking for you is not the web designer's responsibility, often she will have recommendations for companies to use or will include a marketing package as an extra service. The keywords the designer inserts into the proper locations on the site will also eventually help, and you can guide them with the knowledge of your business.

Be patient—the process usually takes over six months to work. Visits will increase, and sometimes BIG. Make sure you have a tracking system in place so you can see the results. Besides continuing your SEO work, make sure you advertise your site.

Do It Yourself

As stated earlier, you can pay others to do this work for you, or you can do it yourself. An advantage of performing SEO work yourself, at least for a short time, is the knowledge you will gain before handing it over to someone else. Here are the necessary, regular steps you must take to do the work yourself. These steps are assuming you have already had your site designed, and keywords are established and in place on your site:

- Submit your site to the various search engines, listed earlier. Each search engine presents specific instructions. Resubmit to the search engines every two months or so, but don't exceed the number of submissions defined on the search engines' instructions, or they'll expel you.
- Perform manual, periodic searches with the search engines, tracking your site rank using different keywords, starting about 6-8 weeks after your search engine submissions. Again, understand that some search engines take up to six months to list your site. Perform this search again every two months or so.
- Document your ranking (by number) research on some sort of spreadsheet, by keyword, search engine and date.
- Keyword popularity changes. Update keywords within your site regularly. If you know you will be doing this work yourself, ask your web designer up front to show you how to access your files, and where to insert your keywords.
- Market your site consistently, using the suggestions under the previous marketing section—especially online press releases. In fact, incorporating a page of press releases into your site also helps your site ranking, as they are heavily crawled by the *spiders* of the search engines and boost exposure.

Above are the primary steps needed to enhance your own search engine rankings. There are other ideas. Refer to the following websites:

10 SEO Tips and do-it-Yourself SEO Guide: www.ezau.com/latest/articles/0147.shtml

SEO Book, a blog: www.seobook.com

SEO Chat: www.seochat.com

Books can be helpful, but since SEO is ever-changing, get the most current possible. Suggestions:

SEO Book, by Aaron Wall

Search Engine Optimization for Dummies, by Peter Kent

Search Engine Optimization on an Extreme Budget, by Nonstop Internet

But honestly, with monthly SEO maintenance fees as low as \$25/month, doing the work yourself may not be worth the effort.

Now, you are ready to begin a website. Shop prices on the web, considering what you learned in Question 4. Then ask your friends and associates for designer recommendations and compare the referrals' pricing to what you found in your research. Peruse the designer's portfolio, if possible—many have online displays of their work.



Example of online website portfolio; web page by article author, Paula Barker

Please write paula.barker@comcast.net for rights to republish.