

Planning Your First Website

So you're starting a business and you need a website. Where do you start?

Whether you hire a designer or use a DIY website kit, there's still a lot you ought to think about first. Obviously the more you do yourself, the less money you'll pay a professional.

A website can be a comparatively cheap form of marketing. But be prepared for the time it takes to develop and maintain your site. Even if you pass this over to a web designer, you still own the business and *you* have to decide what's best.

1) Decide the Aims of your Website

First of all, be very clear *why* you want a website. Only then can you later judge its success.

- Do your competitors all have websites and you feel you're losing out on sales without one?
- Do you want people to find your business online through search engines?
- Do you want the website to persuade people to contact you in order to make a sale?
- Do you want people to see your products or services online (an online catalogue)?
- Do you want to sell your products online?
- Do you want to reinforce the company brand?
- Or something else?

Once you've decided the aims, keep these in mind as you go through the next stages.

2) Research

Consider your competitors. Look at their websites. What are they doing? Why? What do you like? Not like? What do you think they could do better?

Also, when you are browsing if you find any websites that you like, consider *why* you like them. Take notes. But also keep in mind that you're building a website for your customers, not yourself.

3) Start Collecting Content

You may already have some promotional material for your company: business cards, flyers, leaflets and so on. Get these together. Is there anything from them you can use?

a) Write Text – What do you need to tell your customers? Write down what you need to say to get your message across. Don't worry too much about style at this stage. Write notes. And don't just copy text from your leaflets. Take the time to think what you need to say.

b) Collect Images – What do you need to show your customers? Do you need to get photographs taken of your products, your premises or yourself? A video of your product working? A slideshow of your portfolio? Can you buy generic images for your site instead? Also think of illustrations – your logo and so on.

Make sure you get good quality images. Poor images can really reflect badly on your company. Hire a photographer if you're not sure.

4) Put your content into some kind of order

Decide how the text and images should fit together on your site. Try and organise them into pages. A typical small business website would have the following pages:

- ❖ **Home** – an introduction to what you do
- ❖ **About Us** – this engenders trust. Tell people your skills, qualifications and how long you've been in business. Anyone can get a website; you need to show that you actually exist and you are trustworthy.
- ❖ **Products/Services** – a description of what you do/sell. There may be many sub-categories here.
- ❖ **Contact** – so customers know how to contact you.
- ❖ **Links** – to useful resources.

Some others to consider:

- ❖ **News/Blog** – It's likely you'll want to add or highlight news on your site. If you update your site regularly, this gives visitors a reason to come back to your site more often. Also, search engines like websites that change frequently.
- ❖ **FAQs** – if you are giving a lot of information and want to highlight the most important bits.

- ❖ **Legal pages**– Terms and Conditions, Privacy Policy etc.
- ❖ **Sitemap** – a simple site shouldn't need this, but it's something to consider.

Consider some other functionality you might need:

- ❖ Search bar
- ❖ RSS feed
- ❖ Subscribe to a newsletter
- ❖ Feedback form
- ❖ Gallery

Try and ask other people for their opinions on how your information should fit together. Better still, ask your customers (or potential customers). Does the way you've organised your content make sense to them?

5) Edit Your Content

This may be the first time you've written for the web and you may have to adjust your writing style. The important thing to remember is that **people don't read websites, they scan them**. So:

- ❖ Cut your text down to the bare minimum. Don't repeat yourself.
- ❖ In general, keep it simple – use short, simple sentences and use plain language
- ❖ But also consider an appropriate style. Think of your customers – are they young, old, male, female, knowledgeable about your business or newcomers?
- ❖ 'Chunk' your text into short paragraphs with headings. This makes it easier to scan and helps with search engines
- ❖ Use lists when you can.

Always remember that you are making the website for your customers. Get their reactions and feedback at this stage. Can they understand what you're saying?

If you're not sure, pass this over to a professional web writer.

6) Design

You may already have a logo and branding guidelines. If so, your website should reflect your established brand.

At this stage, consider what image you want your company to present: professional, friendly, young, creative, trustworthy, fun, different, classical?

Also consider what other websites in your business are doing. It is safer to follow the genre. If you are selling financial advice, be serious. If you are selling children's parties, be bright and colourful.

Designing a website is a complex process. You have to know about:

- ❖ Colours – colour theory and associations.
- ❖ Typography – which fonts to use
- ❖ Layout – how best to put the text and images on the page

It's best to have a clear brief to give your designer on what you're trying to achieve. Better still, find a website that you think is good as a starting point for discussion.

There are lots of free website templates out there. Have a look for inspiration. See if one might be adapted for your purposes.

7) Test

A designer will normally mock-up a design that you can show your customers to get their feedback before the website is built.

If you can, conduct *usability studies*. (ie Test the website on your customers by asking them to do certain tasks). Otherwise, ask your customers for their general feedback. Make sure they can find the information they need.

That should be enough to get you started. Of course, then you have to build the site and monitor its performance. You'll also need to keep updating and adding to your website over time.

Good luck!