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## How to Create Your Own Website

E-commerce plays an increasingly important role in the way in which products and services are purchased. Websites can be used to market and sell to customers, and to provide after-sales support. E-commerce can also be an important part of strengthening relationships and improving the efficiency of your dealings with suppliers and other key trading partners.

### **Planning your site**

It is essential from the outset that you clearly identify what the purpose of your site is. Typical reasons why businesses develop websites include:

- Building brand awareness
- Saving money
- Selling products
- Providing improved customer support

Remember that what you want the website to accomplish and what your visitors require from the site may differ. You may be concerned about the visual aspects of the site, while your visitors probably care more about how quickly they can find information.

### **Content and audience**

Establish the type of content you will need to support the objectives of the site. Look for examples on the Internet that will enable you to present the content in the most appropriate way. Ensure that you know the audience you are trying to reach.

Try and understand what they will want when they come to your site, how you can initially attract them, what will encourage them to return, and what type of computer and connection speed they are likely to have.

All companies in the UK must also clearly state the company registration number, place of registration and registered office address on all of their websites. A common place to put this information is in the "About us" or "Legal info" page of the site - it does not have to appear on every page.

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## **Planning techniques**

It is a good idea to create a diagram that shows the structure and logic behind the content, presentation and navigation you propose to use. A popular technique for mapping out a website is known as wireframing. This allows you to create a skeleton of the site that describes the basic elements you intend to include. The wireframe is made up of labelled boxes that illustrate the overall navigation and the blocks of content that each web page will contain. The wireframe can be drawn using packages such as Word, PowerPoint or Illustrator.

## **Designing the site**

When designing your website, plan a theme and structure that will hold all the pages together. You should convey an image of good basic operational functionality, neatness, and a professional appearance.

## **Visual aspects**

Create a common theme of colours, fonts, graphics and page layouts. Remember that this can be achieved without the need for spectacular graphics - simplicity and elegance can be more effective. Don't overcrowd your pages - often less is more.

## **Consistency**

Plan to create a unified look for the various sections and pages of your site, so that the users are aware that they are moving around within a single site as they move from page to page.

Create smooth transitions from one page to another by having consistent elements on each page and repeating colours and fonts, for example:

- Placing navigational elements in the same position on each page
- Having a consistent background texture to each page
- Using fonts and colours consistently throughout the site

All of this will help to reinforce the identity of the site.

## **White space**

Don't be afraid to use white space or blank areas in your webpage design. Good use of white space can help define areas of your page and can be used to structure and separate content. A lack of white space can give the impression that the page has too much content and can confuse the user.

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## **Branding**

The brand and image of your business should be reinforced by your website. Consistent use of your company logo throughout the site will help in this, and should be viewed as an element of your overall marketing strategy.

## **Designing for the user**

The key to designing a successful website is understanding the needs of your audience and reflecting these in your design. The success of your website will be largely based upon how easy it is for users to find the information that they require. You should consider including a site map and a search facility to help in the location of information.

Don't make users navigate through too many layers of the site to find the information they want. Bear in mind the "three click rule" which means that users starting at your home page should be able to get to the information they require in three mouse clicks. While this is not always achievable, by taking it into account at the site design stage you are more likely to get close to it. Provide prominent navigation aids so the user can quickly find the information they need. A standard navigation bar that is in the same place on every page enables the user to move quickly through the site.

You should remember that every graphic you add to your website for navigational purposes increases the download time for the user. So keep your navigation buttons simple and reuse the same ones throughout your site. It is now commonplace to have the company logo as a link back to the home page.

## **Amount of content**

Consider how much content should be contained on a webpage. Avoid putting too much information on a page, as this may make it more difficult for the user to locate the information they need. Use links as a method of dividing content between pages. If the page contains large amounts of text, keep paragraphs short to aid online reading.

## **Web typography**

Designing for the web restricts your font choices. If you specify a font that a user does not have, their browser will substitute a default font, changing the look of the page. Use commonly available fonts and test your webpages on multiple platforms to see what effect these have on the overall appearance.

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The webpage will look clearer if you choose fewer fonts and type sizes. Decide on a font for each different level of topic importance. For example, you should have a different font for page headings, section headings and body text. Effective use of different fonts for different levels of importance will guide the user through the content more efficiently.

Choose different size fonts of the same type throughout the site. Consistency will help you to develop a strong visual identity for your site. The size and face of the type used on the page determines the legibility of the text. Remember that it's harder to read on screen than from a paper copy, so keep fonts big enough to be comfortably read online.

Make sure that you have enough contrast between your text colour and the background colour. Dark backgrounds frequently make the text difficult to read, so opt where possible for darker text on a lighter background.

## **Technical website design considerations**

There are several technical issues to consider when designing your website.

- Browser issues - You will have to design webpages that can be displayed by many different browsers. Common browsers include Microsoft Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox, Netscape Navigator, Safari and Opera. You should test your webpages in as many browsers and different operating systems as possible during the development process to ensure that they will display properly.
- Screen resolutions - The most common resolutions, expressed in pixels, are 640 x 480, 800 x 600 and 1024 x 768. If you opt to design your website based upon the higher resolution, then you need to be aware that some screens with lower resolutions may not display all of the content. You cannot control the screen resolution of the monitors used to view your website.
- Download speeds - Not all Internet users have high speed access, so connection speed should also influence your webpage design. Too many images will slow down the speed at which the webpage loads. Generally, pages should load within ten seconds. If your pages download slowly, your users will probably move on to another site.

Try and keep file and image sizes to a minimum –

generally the total size of a webpage should be no more than 40 to 60 kilobytes.

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- Website hosting options - Your website needs to be hosted on a web server in order to make it available on the Internet. Hosting involves housing, serving and maintaining files so that visitors are able to view the content of the website.  
Your website is the public face of your business, so the hosting solution selected must be able to provide a fast, secure and reliable service. You can opt for an in-house hosting solution or go to an external Internet service provider (ISP). Key factors to consider include cost and the level of technical expertise and resources your business has.
- Using an ISP for hosting - Using an Internet service provider (ISP) for web hosting is an external hosting solution where the ISP is responsible for providing your business with connection to the Internet. ISPs can provide different types of hosting services, the most cost effective is a shared server, where the server is owned by the ISP and is located in its offices. The server is used to host several other websites as well as yours.

## **Advantages of using an ISP**

- You do not need to invest in your own web server.
- Most ISPs have very fast connections to the Internet.
- The ISP's server should offer a very high degree of availability (up time) and reliability.
- The ISP should have a secure operating environment, high quality virus protection and the latest software patches to ensure the security of your site.

## **Disadvantages of using an ISP**

- You need to trust your ISP to maintain the availability and security of your website.
- Your website's performance may be compromised if the ISP is hosting too many other sites on a shared server basis.
- You could be affected if your ISP becomes blacklisted as a result of the actions of other sites they host, or the content of those sites. For example, if they host sites containing adult material or sites for companies that send out spam emails.
- In-house hosting - Hosting your own in-house website is always an option. However it does require significant resources. Not only will you need a web server, but you'll also require a highspeed connection to the Internet, and you will be directly responsible for its day-to-day operation and 24-hour support. You will also have to take account of the cost of software licences. In general, the in-house option is probably best suited to larger companies, and/or those with a specialist IT department, as considerable resources are required to handle the ongoing development and support activities.

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## **Maintaining your website**

Maintaining your website is absolutely crucial. Although the technology may be outsourced to an Internet service provider (ISP), it is the responsibility of the website owner to ensure that the content of the site is accurate and updated regularly. This will help in promoting a positive image for the business, and attracting and retaining visitors to the site on a daily basis.

## **Updating your website content**

There is an expectation that websites will be constantly changing. If the content of your website remains static, users may not revisit it and you may lose opportunities to promote new products or services. Your website should look fresh and appealing, and promote an image of success and stability in order to attract and retain visitors on a daily basis.

If you have a news section or announcements about new products then it is vital that these reflect the current situation. If you have old news stories that you feel will be of interest to your visitors, then place them in an archive and allow this to be searched by interested parties.

## **Promoting Your Website**

There are three main ways that people arrive at websites - direct navigation, web referrals and search engines.

### **Direct navigation**

The best way of generating web traffic is to make sure you include your web address on all printed material - business cards, letters, flyers, etc. Choose a simple web address (URL) which avoids hyphens or other punctuation as it will be easier for people to remember. If you operate exclusively in the UK, choose a .co.uk address. If you trade abroad, consider a .com or .eu address as well.

### **Web referrals**

Web referrals are an important means of attracting visitors to your site. There are a number of ways you can generate these.

- Include your web address in all email footers.
- Email marketing - targeted electronic newsletters and offers to customers can be very effective. If the offer is interesting it is easy for people to pass the email on.
- Online advertising - the use of banner and pop-up adverts on other websites to drive people to yours.

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- Reciprocal marketing - finding sites with complementary content and agreeing to have links or banners to each other's sites.
- Forums - you can set up your own, or monitor others, join the discussion and point people towards your website.

## **Search engines**

While search engines are far outstripped by direct referrals, they can still prove useful for attracting customers. Competition for a high ranking on the major search engines is intense because few web users look beyond the second page of results.

If you are expecting your website to generate significant commercial returns, it will be well worth spending the time and effort to ensure you get the most out of your search engine placement. The main way to improve your rating is to make sure you include the right keywords or metadata (information that describes a web page, but isn't visible on the pages) when you build your website and submit it to a search engine.

Use the most relevant keywords from your website and the words that people are likely to use when searching for your products or services. Update your keywords regularly using the search engine reports to help you identify the words that are generating the most hits and those which are not performing.