

10 Steps To A Better Small Business Web Site

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The advent of inexpensive Web authoring software makes it possible for the small business owner to create an effective Web site, as long as the owner or someone in the organization has a few basic computer skills. We've seen workman-like sites developed by secretaries or even teenage family members, but we've also had calls for help from owners who said their site was not working as they hoped it would. Most of these businesses suffered from one or more of the pitfalls that often befall the new Web designer – the answers to which are not always found in today's easy-to-use software.

Here's a guide to avoiding common pitfalls and assuring a more effective site:

1. Always start by setting an objective for your site. Do you want to sell potential customers your service or products? Educate distributors or others? Inform shareholders or employees about your company progress? Always make sure you fix a purpose for the site.
2. Establish your target audience. Is it potential customers? Distributors? Shareholders or Employees? Fixing this and your objective in mind throughout the creative process – simple but vital factors - will keep you well on the way to having an effective Web site.
3. Focus first not on graphics but on content, the most important ingredient in any site. A good way to help develop your content is to follow what student reporters learn in news writing 101: always start with the five "W"s - Who, What, Where, When and Why. For a small business, I would change the order to Who, What, Why, When and Where. At least the first three should appear on the screen when your site comes up so the viewer can immediately recognize who he has found, what service or product you offer and why he should use your product or service. If the last two "W"s don't fit on the screen, they should be a short scroll down. For a moving and storage company, the home or index page might look like this:

Manny's Moving & Storage

Local and Long Distance
Residential Commercial International

50 Years of Service to Satisfied Customers

DOT #T3608 ICC #MC23682

Call (631) 657-4000
now for a free estimate

20 North Woods Road, Babylon, NY 11702 631-657-4000

3. Never place so much material on a single page that you make the viewer scroll on and on until he gets bored and leaves your site. Find a way to break content onto another page. Use the other lesson reporters learn: build a reverse pyramid, with the most important material at the beginning and less important material following in descending order.
4. Develop a page format that makes sense to the viewer. There's a reason most sites keep hyperlinks, on which the viewer clicks to reach other pages, either on the left, on the top, or in both locations. Remember, we learn in school to read from left to right and from top to bottom.

5. Size your pages to fit the smallest monitor on which your site might be viewed. If you create a Web page on a 17-inch screen, it won't appear the same on a 14-inch laptop or 15-inch desktop screen. Headlines and words may wrap differently and graphics may move to a different location. A one-line headline on a 17-inch screen, for instance, may be squeezed into two lines on a 15-inch screen, with a single word on the second line. To avoid this pitfall, limit the width of your page to 650 pixels, which should reproduce properly on a 14-in laptop screen. This is accomplished in a "table," a setting you will find in your authoring software.
6. Don't overload pages with graphics. They take long to load, especially if they are large and haven't been "tweaked" for the Web. This means you should reduce both the actual physical size and the graphic file size so that it loads faster. Most photo editing software will give you a "Save for the Web" feature to accomplish the latter.
7. Avoid the bells and whistles most programs will create for you – the spinning, flashing and musical sounds – for they will mostly distract viewers and make them leave your site before they find what they came to find. Remember, a simple and to the point approach is the best and most effective.
8. Don't forget to place meta tags in you code. There are meta tags for both "Key Words" and "Page Titles." Most search engines look at these tags in order to categorize your site in their database, and this will determine if viewers can find your site. Look at the tags your competition is including in their sites and you will get a good idea what you should include in yours. "Key Words" should include all the words people might use in a search for your type of business. To check your competition, go on line to a site you think is well done, click on "View" then "Source" and the code will appear. Near the top of the page you will find the meta tags. When you create your meta tags, make sure to include all the brackets, quotation marks and code words exactly as you see them in competitors' pages.
9. Whatever graphic style you decide to use, keep it simple and consistent. If you do this, viewers will find your site easy to use. Another thing to keep in mind: strive to make navigation on your site simple and consistent. That will make it a pleasure to visit and use your site. Also, novice graphic designers seem to go wild when they have a wide choice of fonts. A good rule here is **do not use more than two fonts, one for headlines and one for text**. Also, within these two fonts, use **bold** and *italics* sparingly. Constantly changing type font, size and style will make your text difficult to read.
10. Finally, if you follow all these steps and find your site still doesn't work the way you would like, you may want to get some professional help. Don't feel that you have wasted your time, however, because you will now be able to discuss your problems with some technical experience.

Ray Schumack is president of RS&A Public Relations. He has more than 30 years experience as a Newspaper Journalist, Magazine Editor, Public Relations Specialist and Director of Corporate Communications for a Fortune 500 company. His news stories and feature articles have appeared in the Wall Street Journal, The New York Times and other major daily newspapers, as well as national consumer and business magazines. He served as an adjunct professor at Long Island University, establishing and teaching a course in public relations. He also has been a guest lecturer on business news reporting at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

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