

So you want a website?

You've made the decision to have a website so what do you need to know. This document is designed to give you some pointers as to what decisions have to be made, what choices there are and what you really **MUST know** to make a good business decision.

It is divided into 5 sections.

- The Decision
- Before you start.
- Content is King.
- The Law
- The Long Term

This document cannot cover everything due to the rapidly changing world of technology. It will, however, give you general guidance.

The Decision

So why do you need a website? You may still be undecided as to why you should invest in a website. Here are just a few reasons you might want to consider for having a website for your business.

- Your competitors already have a website
- Customers expect you to have a website
- Other businesses expect you to have a website
- It is additional marketing material
- Your business can be open 24/7 365 days a year.
- Your can reach a much larger audience
- It's cheaper than constantly updating printed material

What to do before you start?

This section covers the things you need to know prior to starting work on a website. Whether you choose to do the website yourself or employ a professional there are certain decisions to consider first.

The Domain Name.

What is a domain name? A domain name is very important. It is the address where the website will be found e.g. yourcompany.com. Think of the website as a person, let us call him Walter. Walter lives in a small flat that is part of a large house. That flat has an address. The address means that the postman can find Walter to deliver his mail and you can find him to pay a visit. A domain name is equivalent to the address of Walters flat (hosting is the flat itself which will be explained in more detail later).

Choosing a Domain name

The choice of domain name can mean the difference between successful marketing and a waste of money. Choose your domain name carefully. Think about what your company name is and what you do. Is yours a well known brand? Choosing a domain name that reflects your company name could be a good choice. If not then consider the words which somebody would type into a search engine to find you. Perhaps you sell exotic plants. You might want to have a domain name that includes the phrase 'exotic plants'. You might also include all or part of the company name to make your domain name unique. So if you were called 'Blooming Goods' you might choose the domain name *bloomingexoticplants.co.uk*

Golden Rule: KEEP IT SIMPLE

You also need to consider what Top Level Domain (or TLD) you want to register the domain name with. Do you choose .com, .co.uk, .info, .net or one of the myriad of other domain extensions (TLDs) that keep springing up. Think carefully about where your customers are based. If you have a solely UK customer base then choose the popular .co.uk extension. If you deal with USA based customers then it is best to register a .com domain name. (Americans prefer this.) You could also consider a .eu domain name if you have a Europe wide audience.

Since domain names are quite cheap to register you may choose to register a few to protect your brand or help with marketing (more about marketing later). .co.uk domains can be registered for as little as £6 including VAT for 2 years (or possibly FREE with a hosting package.) .com domains can cost as little as £11 for 12 months including VAT (Prices correct at the time of writing, May 2007).

Don't forget you will need to renew the domain name registration either every year (for .com, .eu etc) or every 2 years (for .uk). Factor this into your budget along with hosting charges.

Registering a domain name

There is nothing saying you can't register your chosen domain name yourself. If you have a valid credit card then the process is simple. Choose a supplier who offers 'free parking' and won't charge huge 'moving away' fees.

If you choose to let somebody else register the domain name for you there are things to consider. In either case you must provide accurate information to the registrar. Don't be tempted to pop in a false address to avoid using your home address.

Limited companies must, by law, declare their Registered Address on all paperwork so you should use this. If you are a sole trader then use the trading address or your home address.

If you provide false information then this can be looked at as deception. If somebody thinks you are trying to deceive them over a simple address then why should they trust you enough to do business with you?

Make sure the Domain name is registered in **your** name or the name of the business. Don't ever let a third party register it in their name. The law will back them in a dispute as they will be recognised as the legal registrant (owner) of the domain name even if you paid for it.

If you ever need to prove that you own a domain name it is much easier to do if your name and address appear on the registration database. After all you can prove who you are!

The hosting

Hosting goes hand in hand with the domain name. Where the domain name is the address by which you find the website, the hosting is the room where the website will live. Hosting provides the space for a web site and a suitable environment for it to operate.

To return to our earlier analogy, hosting is Walter's flat. How big the flat is depends on how big you envisage Walter getting and what you want Walter to do. If Walter has to house thousands of products with a picture of each then he'll obviously need a bigger flat. You also have to take into account that the hosting company, that is Walter's landlord, might place restrictions on the use of the flat. You might be limited as to what type of things you can keep there, some hosts do not allow music files or movie files as downloading these takes up large amounts of resources.

Consider what you want the website to do (see 'The Purpose'). If you are selling goods over the internet then you will need a host (Landlord) who allows this. If your site is simply a brochure site then most hosts can accommodate you with few restrictions.

Hosting prices start from as little as £17 per year for very basic packages, these generally have the most restrictions and the least 'frills'. Free hosting can be found but it generally comes at the expense of having a site littered with adverts or worse, pop-ups and pop-unders! You should avoid free hosting if you can't stop the adverts as it looks unprofessional.

If you pay more than approximately £36 per year for a basic website hosting, brochure or e-commerce, then you are probably paying over the odds. Look again at what you require against what the package provides. Linux hosting is generally much cheaper than Windows.

Most of the sites we have built are hosted on Linux servers and cost less than £36 per year to host, regardless of their size, complexity and features.

What is a database?

A database is the vessel in which you will keep your information (product details etc). To return to our earlier analogy, Walter needs to keep the products somewhere. He purchases a large cupboard. This cupboard is the database. The cupboard is divided up into shelves and this makes it easy for Walter to find things. Every product has a place to live within the cupboard so Walter can go directly to the product when he needs to.

MySQL databases are the cheapest and most portable. Many of the popular shopping cart packages use MySQL databases to store the product information. There are familiar Windows alternatives, such as Microsoft Access, but they come at the expense of requiring a Windows environment to perform in.

What are dynamic scripts?

Dynamic scripts are the pieces of a website which allow you to collect the information from the database and display it on the screen. In our analogy it is the method by which Walter goes to the cupboard and tells you everything that is in it. Dynamic scripts mean less maintenance for the website itself.

It's not just an on-line shop which can use dynamic scripts to make things easier to look after (maintain). Think about a site which promotes different events. This too would benefit from being 'dynamic' since it would make life easy to just put the information into the cupboard than take Walter out and explain to him about each individual new event each time things changed.

You must ensure that the host you choose allows you to run dynamic scripts. The best choice is a host who allows the following script languages: php, Perl and CGI minimum.

Do it yourself?

If you are comfortable with technology you might want to build your own website. However there are some things worth remembering. Your website will be the first thing on-line projects see. First impressions are crucial. If you make a bad first impression with your website then it is almost impossible to get a second chance. Your site should look professional. It should be easy to navigate and use. Make sure you comply with the law (see 'The Law') and that you have no spelling or grammatical errors. Lastly test the website from end to end to ensure EVERYTHING works.

Choosing a web designer?

If you decide to give the job of building the website to somebody else there are key things to look for. Since you are making an investment you need to choose a company or individual who can look after your needs. Don't be afraid to ask questions.

Ask to look at previous work and it should be work that **you** like. They should treat you in a professional manner but not be too formal. Find somebody you feel comfortable with and who is prepared to answer your questions – however silly they may appear – happily and fully. Don't be baffled by jargon – a good designer will be prepared to explain everything to you in plain English, while also listening to what you want. Never be afraid to question.

Obtain details of on-going support. Ask for references or testimonials. Ask other people for recommendations – ask why they are happy to recommend the person/company. '*They did our site*' isn't really a good enough reason for you to use the company. '*They really looked after us and listened to our requirements*' would be a much better reason.

Be aware that there are a lot of companies out there masquerading as professionals and you need to protect your investment.

Content is King!

There are things to consider about your website regardless of doing it yourself or choosing a professional to help out. Remember this is going to represent **your** business.

The Audience

Who are your visitors going to be? Are they other business owners? Are they Brides to be? Is it 20 something females from Birmingham you're after? The type of audience governs how you want the site to look and feel and the way you will write the content. Writing in a totally informal style if you are appealing to professional people is probably inappropriate. Using a very staid colour scheme won't be appropriate if you are looking for young visitors.

Write down who you expect to attract to the site – this helps keep you focused. A good designer will ask you this question.

The purpose

Why do you want a website? Is it an extension of your printed material? Do you want to sell your products over the internet? Do you just want a quick and easy reference point to direct your customers to when they want more information?

Whatever the purpose of the website you should think through all the things it needs to do. If you are selling on-line then you need to have: pictures of your products, descriptions, fixed prices and defined shipping costs. You should have proper written terms and conditions statements and preferably a formal privacy policy. Remember people will have to make the decision to buy and be able to complete the transaction wholly over the internet. You should just be able to wait for the orders to arrive and organise the actual delivery.

If you want to provide more information about your services then think about how the information will break down. Do you have relevant images that suit what the company does? Would it help customers to see your premises? Could you convey information in graph or bar chart form? What is your 'Unique Selling Point'?

You should always consider telling the prospective customer a little about who they are dealing with. Don't be a faceless entity hiding in hyperspace. Put a name and face to the company and people will feel more comfortable dealing with you. You need to build 'trust'.

Do you need to be found in search engines to generate much of your traffic? Your site should be geared to well chosen key phrases to facilitate this. Search Engine Optimisation is a whole topic in its own right – here we'll simply say it's something to be seriously considered.

Do you want to update the content of your website on a regular basis and do you want to do this yourself? You might want to consider a Content Management System. These allow you to quickly and easily update a website without any special programming knowledge. A good designer will teach you how to use the system.

The Law

There are certain laws which pertain to websites as well as other aspects of business. You should make sure you comply with the laws which are relevant to your circumstances.

The disability discrimination Act (DDA)

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) applies to websites just as much as to other aspects of your business.

A recent formal DRC (Disability Rights Commission) investigation of 1000 websites showed that over 80% were next to impossible for disabled people to use. Firms were warned that they faced legal action under the DDA and the threat of unlimited compensation payments if they failed to make websites accessible for people with disabilities.

FACT - In 2000 the Sydney Olympic Committee were successfully sued by a blind man for \$20,000 (£8,000) over their inaccessible website.

You are required to make 'reasonable' provision for disabled visitors to your website. The minimum you should consider is having resizable text and a keyboard capable navigation system. Where an image is used to convey an important message you should ensure there is a text alternative!

Remember some people use screen readers and keyboard navigation rather than looking at the screen and using a mouse.

Registered Companies

Those companies registered with Companies House must show, clearly and in a prominent place, the company details. These have to include the place of registration (England and Wales, Scotland etc) the registration number and the registered company address.

This information must appear on all communications issued by a company and that includes emails as well as web sites! If you are VAT registered then you also need to show your VAT number.

It is always good practice to include a land address, phone number and email address on your website whether you are a registered company or not. Think about your customer and what would make them have more confidence in your company. Seeing a real address and choice of ways to contact you gives them a sense that you are open to contact.

The Long Term

Once you have your website you can't just forget about it. You should update the content from time to time to keep it fresh. Review the look and feel of the site every 2 years minimum as tastes and technology change. Make sure the site keeps up with the rest of your business.

The website won't miraculously gain you business over night. It takes time to build good links with other websites and gain the trust of visitors. You need to **include** the website in your marketing strategy not expect it to be a marketing strategy in itself.

Remember to renew your domain names when you are reminded by your registrar and pay your hosting bills when your host reminds you hosting is due for renewal.

Make promoting your website a daily thing. Include your web address on all your paperwork and in your email communications. Remember the three R's of business – Repeats, Referrals and Recommendations! Passing your web address is the easiest way to encourage these.

For more information on owning a website please contact the author for an informal chat.

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