

Does Your Business Need A Website?

By Philip A. Grisolia, CBC

Websites and telephone books have a lot in common. Countless companies refuse to waste their money on ads in phone books, typically because those ads would never generate any meaningful business, and probably wouldn't pay for themselves, let alone produce a profit. That same is often true when it comes to the Wonderful World of the Web.

You've heard the pitch. You're told over and over that a Website will be your great online "store," open 24/7, with no employees to pay, no rent to pay, no utilities to pay. What more could your business ask for, right?

Well, how about enough visitors to your Website to make your 24/7 online store worth the time, effort and expense to create it? And where will all those visitors – those potential buyers of your Stuff, your products or services – come from? Those are just the first two in a long series of important question you should ask yourself before creating a Website for you business,

Oh, and don't expect your site to be a money-maker, certainly not at the beginning. Probably not for many months to come. Many Website never turn a profit at all. The most recent number I saw said there are more than 16 million abandoned Websites out there in cyberspace. Most were "stores" that obviously didn't turn a profit, otherwise they would have stayed "open," right?

I'm not suggesting that your business shouldn't have its own Website. What I am suggesting is that you do some thinking, do some planning, so that if and when you decide your business actually needs a Website – and please note the word "needs" – you can do it right.

What kind of planning? The serious kind, with pencil and paper so you can capture, streamline, then polish your thoughts. Start with the "Stuff" you intend to offer. Products? Services? Information? Define the kinds of visitors you want to attract. Decide what it is you want them to do when they get there. Buy something? Subscribe to a newsletter? Perhaps both?

Layout out a plan that will convince visitors to your site to do what it is you want them to do. And don't quit with just one such plan. You'll need a Plan B and Plan C because Plan A, no matter how good it might seem initially, is likely not to work. Or at least not work as you thought it would. Frequent testing of offers, prices, graphics, descriptions, etc. should be included in those plans, and in the budget for your site.

Now take your planning a step further and ask yourself – regardless of what it is your site will offer – where do my would-be visitors now get the Stuff my site will sell? Next, decide what incentives you can afford to offer those potential visitors so they'll switch to buying that Stuff from you. Oh, and find ways to make your Stuff at least appear unique, 'cause "Me-Too" Stuff doesn't sell.

Ask yourself, too, how you're going to attract those visitors to your site. If you have existing customers – and access to their email addresses – then your Website can be an extension of your existing business. But if you're starting a business from scratch and expect visitors to flock to your Website, think again. That's not likely to happen, certainly not without extra planning and expense.

Other things you'll need – items with some on-going costs attached to them – include at least the following:

1. A URL, the domain name or Web address for your site.
2. A company to host your site.
3. If yours is an ecommerce site, one on which you'll sell things that people have to pay for, you'll need a "shopping cart" plus some way to accept credit card payments for what your customers order.
4. To process those credit card payments so you get your money, you may also need something called a "merchant account."
5. Money to pay for some type of promotion for your site is also essential.

Then there are what's called "one-time costs" that in reality occur more than once. That's because if you want to assure the return of visitors to your site you must update it – at least quarterly. Why? So your returning visitors can find something new each time they come back. Those so-called one-time costs will include:

1. An experienced Web designer to create and later update the appropriate look and feel of your Website. In addition to the designer, you'll also need...

2. A professional writer whose job it will be to create, and as needed to modify, the tone or attitude for your site's contents, describing whatever it is you want to sell, whatever impression you want to convey to your site's visitors. "Content is King!" according to the experts. It can be the most convincing element of your website.

For both services, look for people who've been in business for a while, who will be in business when you want your site updated. You don't want to start from scratch each time you update your site? Starting fresh can be very expensive.

The bottom line is this: Make your decisions carefully, plan your Website wisely. There's no need to hurry. The Web will be there when – and if – you decide your business actually does need a Website.



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