

WHY DO I NEED A BUSINESS WEBSITE?

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A Primer for Small Business Owners Without a Web Presence

If you are making enough money, have enough customers that you know are loyal and you are certain that there is or never will be any competition to you, and you don't have a website, you might wonder why you would need one.

However, if you could do with some extra customers or you are not certain that you secure position in your industry will last (and who in their right mind would be that confident), you should at least investigate acquiring a website. If you approach the entire process correctly, a website offers a potential revenue stream that is unlimited and ever-increasing. And like many things, a website's value becomes truly apparent once you have one. If used correctly, it will soon become indispensable.

Below are some reasons why you should have a business website if you don't already. And if you have a simple one, perhaps it's time to look at upgrading it with a few features to help you harness the potential of the Internet.

More Business

Build a website (or have one built for you) and tell people what you do and how you do it. It takes some work and you need to spend time and money on getting people to visit your site but if you do it right, you will see additional business come your way. It is important that your website clearly says what you do and how you can help the website visitor. You should also build in an easy way for people to contact you, preferably by e-mail and phone.

If you don't have a website, you have to rely on getting the word out using business cards, flyers and advertising (if you can afford it). That limits your sphere of influence tremendously to the people you meet and perhaps the local region in which you advertise, which is great if you are a plumber or electrician but if you offer a product or service that can be sold further afield than your town or suburb, you are doing your business no good by refusing to have a website.

Advertising on the Internet is relatively inexpensive when compared to advertising anywhere else and you have the entire world as a potential market, at least in theory. What is more, you can do a lot of online promotion for free – it just takes time and some knowledge, which you can pick up from books or resources on the Internet.

Cool Factor

Why do companies take big, fancy offices? They could do their jobs just as well in smaller, less flashy digs and they could save money as well. However, large, fancy offices project success and say “we are serious about our business and we are successful”. A website, on the most basic level, is the same.

If you are in business and *don't have a website*, you look like a two-bit operation. Or you look like you are still stuck in the Dark Ages.

Promotion Tool

More and more people are using the Internet to do research about products and companies and without a website you just aren't going to be seen by them. With faster and cheaper broadband Internet, this trend is only going to continue. In many Asian and European countries, people make their decisions about what they are going to do and buy based solely on what they read on the Internet. Soon it will be the same here.

Although promoting your website online can be expensive, prices for online advertising are low when compared to traditional media and can be just as effective – even more so. A website in effect combines a phone book listing, brochure and business card in one – with the advantage that you can change or add to the material that your web surfing audience sees at any time. And when combined with effective online marketing techniques, your website can help promote you far better than any other medium from a cost point of view.

If you don't have a website and happen to people hear about you, where can they go to find out more about you and your company? Or if they are looking for what you offer on the Internet, how will they find you?

More and more people don't want to bother looking in the phone book unless they have to and many don't like phoning the company they want to find out about as it is too “in your face” and they are afraid of being sold something. Your website would provide a non-threatening place where they can find out all they want to about your company and what you offer.

Information for Existing Customers/Clients

It is a well known tenet of business that you should keep your existing customers/clients informed about what you are up to as they have already purchased what you have to offer and there is a good chance that they will do so again if offered the right product or service at the right price. You don't have to do the expensive and time-consuming "new customer dance" to persuade them that your company is worth giving their money to. They already have!

Websites are a great place to promote your new product lines or services or to display special offers. Customers who know your website and find it useful and informative will return from time to time to see what is new. The main thing is that they get something out of their time on your site. And if you can keep them coming back, you have a captive audience – something that would be really expensive to do using other media.

If you don't have a website, where do your existing customers go to find out that one detail they need to know about one of your products or what your terms are? They have your brochure, but it will soon be out of date and require a reprint at great cost. It might already be out of date for all they know. And it really isn't worth a phone call to find out a few little details about your product because the last time they called, the person who they wanted to talk to was out to lunch. If you have a website, they can quickly and easily find the information they need at their leisure. They can also see what new offers and special deals you have.

Communication Channel

More and more people are realizing the value of websites for communication between customers/potential customers and companies. Even a simple "Contact Us" form on your website could help make it easier for website visitors to contact you. However, you can set it up to ask pertinent questions as well, to find out more about the person contacting you or their company and what their needs are. This will help you understand your market that much better. More advanced systems like e-mail newsletters allow website visitors to sign up for e-mail newsletters automatically and the website owner to send out informative articles regularly to keep in touch with their customers. You can also imagine the impact of well made video and audio on the site, communicating messages from company officials or promoting new products.

If you don't have a website, people have to phone you or send an e-mail to get the information they want. Phoning is a little too personal for many people if

they are still comparing prospective suppliers and is a real hassle if they want to know a small detail about a product or service. What is more, phoning often leads to being transferred from one person to another or put on hold for ages. Plus, what happens if you aren't available. They have to phone again. E-mail is becoming a more popular communication medium for several reasons. Customers can take the time to request all of the information they need, they have a physical record of what they said as well as the date and time it was requested and they can know that the request will (or should) get to the right person. However, finding an e-mail address can be a hassle as many people don't advertise them – it tends to encourage spam. If you have a website with a "Contact Us" form (and most websites should have this facility), you can receive e-mails without your e-mail address being exposed while requesting all sorts of additional information along with their message (thereby making your contact form a mini-survey) and your prospective customer can contact you at their leisure and take the time to request all of the information they need.

Research

Every business needs to know what their customers want and need and websites offer an easy way for you to collect information from your visitors through questionnaires and surveys. This can be open and available to every visitor, or available only to customers to make it more focused. Information is power and this is a cheap and effective way of getting to know your customer a little better and providing more of what they want.

Automating Systems

As we become busier, websites can help empower the small business owner by automating many of the mundane chores that are required of them. This can be a godsend for one or two person company where the business owners are managers, receptionists, accountants, stock clerks, janitors, delivery persons and more!

Anything that can give you extra time to sell what you offer and make more money must be worth considering. When we built EZBIZsa, one of the major aims was to include as many automated functions as possible to help and empower the small business owner and free them up as much as possible from time consuming activities like hunting down overdue invoices and quotes that have yet to be responded to, and figuring out when last they saw a particular customer. As far as we know, there aren't any other similar web suites, but it's only a matter of time before website developers start integrating more and more business functions into their sites.

Most website developers won't include business automation into their sites unless you ask them, and then you will pay a premium for it. However, if these systems give you an extra 15 minutes a day, you will save 5 hours a month or

60 hours a year. That's quite a bit of time, if you think about it, and if time is money, think of the extra money you are generating.

Expertise Factor

If you want to be successful, become the "go to" guy or gal in your industry. I have seen this sentiment echoed over and over by respected business gurus and business leaders alike. It makes sense. If people acknowledge that you know what you are doing because of what you know, they won't hesitate to contact you or refer their friends to you either. And this is where a website really makes a difference. You can use your business website as a platform to build up your reputation as a knowledgeable person and expert in your field by writing articles, insights, commentaries and reviews about your industry. It does take time and not everyone wants to do it, but the results can be impressive over the long term once the word gets out. What is more, these articles make your website interesting and make it worth visiting. People will gradually start visiting your website more and more often as long as you keep adding interesting content. An added bonus is that the search engines like Google and Yahoo! will rank your website higher in web searches if you regularly add new content that is worthwhile and a high ranking is worth more than gold these days.

Commerce Facilitator

Websites are becoming more and more important commerce facilitators, allowing small businesses to sell their wares through the Internet. Retailers don't need to have stores any longer and many very successful people sell their wares exclusively online. However, small business owners who run a store can really enhance their bottom line with an online version of their brick and mortar shop. And just because your shop is doing well doesn't mean that you should overlook setting up an online store as well. It will allow you to attract customers who would never have come to your real shop because they lived too far away or didn't know you existed.

Arguments against Setting up A Website

It's Too Expensive

Having a website built for you can be expensive. However, there are lower cost options. If you want a simple two or three page website that offers an online presence, there are free website builders that you can use. It won't cost you a cent. However, if you want something more professional, EZBIZsa web suites offer fantastic value for money for just R269,00 per month. With that you get a

free .co.za domain name and they even build the site for you for free.

I Have Enough Customers

Surely no-one has enough customers. And what happens when a new competitor pops up and starts stealing your business. It's too late to start looking for new business then. It makes good business sense to keep your options open and promote yourself wherever you can. You never know what fantastic new deal might come of it.

I Don't Know Anything about Computers

At least this is being honest. Many older people have no idea how computers work, let alone the Internet and so they are a little afraid of the idea of websites – after all, if they don't know how the Internet works, there is no way that they will see the benefit of a presence there. All we can suggest is that they take the plunge and try it. It is very easy once they get the hang of it and it can become addictive. And a fear of computers is nothing to be embarrassed about. There are most probably lots of people who could help teach them.

I Have a Really Small Business so I Don't Think it's Worth Having a Website

I would like to ask you one question. Do you want your business to grow? The lifeblood of any business is promotion. If people don't know about what you do, how will you make money? No matter how small your business, it can benefit from a web presence. You don't have to spend a lot of time and money on it initially but you should really have some sort of Internet presence or you will be missing a great opportunity.

Conclusion

Websites are becoming more and more important as promotional tools and any business that resists building one risks being left behind. Websites need not be expensive nor complex and they can be enhanced and improved over time. But if you don't have a website yet, we suggest thinking seriously about it sooner rather than later.

Caveat

One word of caution. Please do not think that you can just have a simple website built and people will flock to your business. Just as in the real world, it

takes time and money to build up your reputation and influence online. It means learning new ways of doing and thinking about some things and it may even pay to buy and read some books about the subject or get professional help. Success on the Internet is not (usually) quick, nor is it easy. But one thing is certain. If you persevere and do things properly, you will be successful online. Too many people have a cheap website built with very little to offer the viewing public and then complain that they got no return out of it. That's like renting space in a shopping mall, putting a few tables and chairs in it, calling it a restaurant and then sitting back and waiting for people to arrive – which they won't. You have to offer them something. You have to work at it. Your website must look nice and more importantly, must offer information and insight that will help your visitors or be of value to them. Otherwise it's a glorified online brochure – and there are too many of those.

About The Author

Greg Bahlmann is a website designer and web developer based in Johannesburg, South Africa. He helps manage EZBIZsa web suites and is a keen supporter of promoting the Internet as a vehicle for small business proliferation.