

ANSWER CENTRAL

A Recipe for Setting up a Website

For many customers, your site will be the first time they encounter your business. So you'll want to make a good impression.

By Louise Witt

Q: I run a business in my home that teaches cooking basics to children and to those who have never cooked. I am looking to branch out. I have done the groundwork, but now I need a website. Can you advise me?

A: Think of setting up a website as if you were establishing a business from scratch. Be prepared to put in the time and the effort to make it successful. For many customers, your site will be the first time they encounter your business. So you'll want to make a good impression.

Before you get down to the nitty gritty of creating a site, think about the name you want to use. You'll likely want to use your company's current name, but you may want to come up with another name--something catchy, memorable, and unique, says James Paden, owner of Xemion Web Design in Hoagland, Ind. Since you're expanding your business, this might be a good opportunity to consider whether your current company's name is the best possible.

Next, you'll want to check Internet domain sites to see if anyone else has registered the name you've chosen, says Paden. He recommends that you search NameCheap.com (www.namecheap.com), but there are a number of reputable name-registration services out there. If no one else has registered your company's name, you can. That way you won't worry about another business using it in the future. This could spare you a lot of headaches.

Then, you'll want to look at your competitors' sites--both in your local area and around the globe, says Tracy Fredrychowski, president of Small Business Web Solutions in Lexington, S.C. That way you'll know what you have to do to differentiate your site and get it to stand out from all the clutter on the Internet. She advises her clients to offer visitors some service. In your case, you may want to offer cooking tips, or post a recipe. "You want something that draws them in," Fredrychowski says.

Figure out exactly what you want on your site before you start designing it, or hire a web designer. If you have a small budget, and you're confident you handle programming, you may want to try to create your site yourself. You can buy a do-it-yourself handbook, or you could download website development software from the Net.

However, both Paden and Fredrychowski say that if you want to have a professional looking site, you may want to consider paying more money to hire a designer. The cost will depend on what you want your site to do. If you simply want it to be an online brochure, providing a description of your business and contact information, design services won't run you as much. On the other hand, if you want to an e-commerce site through which you can sell products, such as cooking utensils or cookbooks, it'll be more expensive.



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To make sure you chose a designer whose style you like, look at their portfolios online. If you like what you see, contact the designer's previous clients to learn how he or she conducts business. For more robust sites, make sure the designer builds around a content management system. "That let's you update the website yourself, so you don't have to call up the web designer ever time you want to change the text or an image," Paden says.

Many designers can set up a host for your site. That could be an additional charge or it could be included as part of their services. But you'll likely want to use a professional hosting firm-they have the servers to keep your site up and running 24/7. They also provide security from hackers and sufficient memory to back-up your data. Jesse Bloch, founder and president of B 2 (squared) Technology Management in Guttenberg, N.J., says many Internet providers, such as MSN, Netscape and AOL, also provide hosting services that might be adequate for some home businesses. The choice of a host is important, so make sure the service you choose can meet your needs for a reasonable price.

When choosing designers, Fredrychowski advises you to make sure that they know about search engine optimization. This means that they will be able to set up your site so that search engines, including Yahoo and Google, pick it up. "You can have a beautiful site, but if it's not designed to be search engine friendly, then it won't be found," she says.

Once you've built a site, Fredrychowski suggests that you update it regularly. If you're solely providing information about your business on your site, you'll want to change it at least once a month. Maybe post a new recipe every month. But if you're selling products, Fredrychowski recommends that you update the site every week. Promote a new mixer or a cooking class. After all, your site is an extension of your business, and you want people to visit both regularly.

And for more on setting up a website, see FSB's recent story, "Bug Bytes," at www.fortune.com/fortune/smallbusiness/articles/0,15114,614407,00.html

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