6 Ways to rev up your website

Author: Marketing / Deborah Whitman
Source: bCentral / MSNBC / 2.03.04

Creating a business Website can be a major investment of time, money or both. Here are six suggestions for making your Website work harder for you. They are derived from looking at hundreds of small-business Websites and talking to several designers who work with smaller businesses.

1. **Cleanliness is next to godliness:**
   Too many small businesses are enamored with speckled backgrounds, unreadable type fonts and a bewildering gaggle of buttons and animated gewgaws running across their Websites. Resist the temptation. A simple, clean design will do a better job for you than a site that looks like a flashing slot machine. You don't see the big guys like Amazon or Yahoo using pink marble or shadowy multi pattern logos for their site backdrop. There is a reason for that. The background can quickly get in the way of the site itself, so keep it simple.

2. **Catch them in the first 10 seconds.**
   Your front page needs to be both a stop sign and a fast, effective messenger. "In two to three seconds the person should know exactly what the site is about or what the business does," says Josh Benevista.. Determine what image and message you want the customer to "get" in those first few seconds, and design your front page toward that objective. A short mission statement, or a summary of what your business does can be very helpful.

3. **The first page should load FAST:**
   If you want to catch them in the first 10 seconds, your front page should not take 30 seconds to reveal itself. Ideally, your front page should load in 12 to 15 seconds over a 28.8-baud modem. Photographs (or uncompressed and unoptimized images) are usually the culprits when pages load too slowly. Many small businesses scan photos for their Websites, but Beneviste warns that "just scanning a photo and throwing it up on your site is always a 'no-no'". You need to compress photo images so they are small enough to load quickly. Software packages such as Photoshop do this by removing some color information from your photo and reducing the quality of the image. It's a balancing act to remove enough information so the photo loads quickly but not so much that the image look like an amateur pointillist painting. It is more art than science; a good designer gets better results than a novice.

4. **A navigation system that a 6-year-old can master.**
   Make it extremely easy for people to find their way around your site. On the Web, the system that helps you find your way around a site is known as its navigational elements (or buttons). "Navigation should be clear to a 6-year-old," says Sean Shelton. In fact, Shelton actually used to ask his son to test sites, before he outgrew the task around age eight. Navigation is easiest to find if it's on the left side or top of the screen. Thompson notes that since some surfers still turn off graphics, you need to provide text-based navigation (ALT tags), as well.

5. **Update your site regularly with fresh information.**
   Bring people back to your site by providing important or difficult-to-find information. A daily article, news, report or showcase an upcoming event. Retailers can use news to create timely point-of-sale information that can improve sales, and consumers can find out when an event is in their area. The one caution here is that you must keep information up-to-date. If you don't have time to keep it current, avoid time-sensitive information altogether.

6. **Hire professionals to design your site.**
   If you can afford it, your site will deliver better results if you work with a designer and a professional photographer.