

Designing Small Business Web Sites

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The niche web design series continues by looking at small business site design, one of the most in-demand design niches around. Every web designer is more successful when they incorporate this type of web design in their repertoire. This article is also useful to small business owners who want to be aware of what they need in a web site, and what to ask for from a designer.



Concrete Functionality

The first decision to make when designing a small business site is whether to use straight coded (CSS, XHTML or HTML) layouts to structure the site or whether to use a content management system such as Drupal, Joomla, or Mambo. The important factors to consider when making this decision are a) how easy does the owner need maintenance, updates, and additions to be and b) how interactive and seamless should the site be? A content management system can be customized to look like a coded site yet afford rich interaction (blogs, discussion forums, image galleries, file upload areas, and so on) and are relatively easy for the owner to update and add content to on their own. Of course, if the owner intends to engage a web master to manage their site, this choice is not such a big issue, since interactive features such as forums, blogs, and so on can be added to the uniquely coded site.

Usability is Key

When you walk into a store, it is important that you are able to easily find your way around the aisles and locate what you are looking for. The same goes for an online business - you have to make it easy for potential clients to explore the site, and consider what is being offered for sale. One easy way to do this is to keep the layout consistent and well organized throughout the whole site. Keep navigation consistent, so visitors know where to click to progress through the screens of the site. Label important pages clearly, so that there is no hesitation or frustration as people try to maneuver through the site. Keep image, files, and shopping cart pages small in byte size, so that people don't have to wait for a page to load before they can use it. Also, make sure the font size of the text is large enough for people of all ages to read without strain.

Setting Up Your Store Front

Most online businesses go beyond mere information about their products and services, and actually offer merchandise, subscriptions, services, and so on for purchase from their web site. The easiest way to do this is to set up a shopping cart software program within the web server: - my personal favorite is the open source program Zen Cart which can be configured to accept credit card, e-check, COD, check

or money order, or direct bank transfer payments using such gateway programs as Authorize or PayPal.

Once the software has been installed, it is quite easy to put up your products or services, including a picture, generous description, model numbers, quantities, taxes, and attributes such as color, size, and such. This sort of software also produces a very usable invoice that can be printed and packaged with customer orders. Shopping cart software can be customized to "match" the rest of the site as well, so that the whole visual experience is seamless.

Showcasing The Business Owner

The ideal way to draw customers back to a business site (besides selling something that is worth buying), is to set up the owner as an expert in their field, no matter how trivial or common that field may seem. This simple strategy helps to create a "buzz" around the site, one that will help people associate your product or service type with the site you are designing. To do this, expertise has to be shared, which can be done quite easily using interactive software such as a blog, writing articles, creating a regular newsletter or ezine, collecting an email list to send regular updates, writing a book, e-book, or booklets, creating videos, and so on. There are so many different ways to share knowledge and insights, that every business owner can find the ones that fit their skills and abilities the best.

This combination of an easy to navigate site, efficient and appealing shopping cart, and the use of interactive and informational software to establish field expertise makes for a winning web site, no matter what kind of small business you are showcasing. So, take the time to plan out the site first, keeping these tips in mind as you do. You'll be one step closer to launching a successful and popular small business site in the wide open spaces of the cyber landscape.