

Plan your way to website happiness

30 June 2003. By James McGoram



James McGoram sheds some light on what a home business may hope to achieve with a website, and some of the cost-effective ways of creating one

Getting online is an increasingly important task for home businesses nowadays, most of us recognize it, many of us have done it, and many have had bad experiences. Indeed, when making the decision to build a business website, there are a whole raft of questions that need to be asked, and only one obvious answer; not all websites are created equally.

It's commonly accepted that beyond providing very simple marketing, home-built sites no longer do businesses any favors. More and more people are Internet savvy these days, and more and more people can spot a DIY site from a mile away. Not only that, but the things a DIY site can do are extremely limited.

For the sake of argument, let's assume we've already decided to go for professional assistance. Don't be worried by this; done right this can save you money, or better still, help you to generate more of it.

So the first question must surely be, how do you sort through all of the hype, sales-pitches and marketing guff to find the solution that suits you?

There's an answer to this that is easy to say, but harder to put into action. That answer is to create a clear plan based on accurate advice before you even go shopping for somebody to build it. Now, many people struggle to grasp all of the complexities of Internet technology, even among IT professionals – so it's very important to seek advice before you plan.

Accurate advice lets you know what is possible, what budgets you may need to set long-term and just where in your business a website fits. Remember, modern websites can do most things that the software on your PC can do, but with the advantage of being accessible from any computer connected to the Internet. That makes them perfect tools for coordinating home businesses.

- You could be running a task list and calendar online that you and other home-based operators login to each day.
- You could be using message boards to stay in touch while working on a project.
- Or you could be selling your products to people around the world. It's fast-paced and complex, but not impossible to understand.

So **your plan should include not only the cost of building a site, but the cost of keeping it running.** Just like offices and shops in the real world, websites need a place to live. So web hosting, maintenance, website traffic reports and the cost and method of updates are all extremely important factors. These are your website overheads. Often, even **in the first year of operating a site, this cost can outweigh the cost of building it in the first place.** So budget for web overheads, and choose your provider carefully.

Some things that may affect ongoing costs are those associated with making changes to the site.

- Will you need to pay a web designer to do these?
- Can you do them yourself using a desktop program like 'FrontPage' and uploading them using ftp?
- Or **will 'content management' be enabled on the site, allowing you to edit it directly online?**

This **last option is by far the cheapest and best solution long term, but can be more costly up front.** Using 'FrontPage' and ftp means that you need to spend a lot more time maintaining your site and the quality may slowly degrade if you don't, and you will need to look at security issues carefully. Yet **paying a web designer every time is far too expensive.**

Three options and three sets of consequences. If you know they exist, you can plan for them from the beginning.

Your plan is the web designers' brief. If they can't fulfill the brief, then don't choose them. In fact, having a clear plan will halve the number of designers you need to consider immediately. Once you've done that you can begin to grade them on the cost and the quality of their services.

A very few design firms will also let you lease some or all of the website – so if capital is a problem, but cash flow is not, this could be the key difference between having a great website that boosts your business, and one that never gets off the ground. Increasingly, the method of paying for a site is affecting how people use them.

If, from this article, you take away one piece of information, let it be this; That **knowing about these factors before you begin, and planning for them, will save you time and money in the long run.** From my experience working on a number of large-scale and small projects alike, going from crisis to crisis with websites is the fastest way to spend money, and not a great way of building something useful.

There's no need to take chances, seek advice and succeed by design.