

Set Your Sites

If you can't see the benefits of the Web, adjust your outlook.

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By Paul and Sarah Edwards

Q: Many people say you need a Web site for your business, but I have a local service business. **I don't even get customers from the other side of town, so why would I need a Web site?** I don't use the Internet that much myself, and I recently read—yes, I still read the local newspaper—that 29 million people quit using the Internet last year. I've also read there are millions of Web sites, and getting listed high enough on a search engine to matter is difficult, if not impossible. Do I really need to spend what it takes in time and money to have a Web site?
Name Withheld

A: While you make a number of valid points, the fact remains **you're better off having a Web site than not having one.** Think of a Web site as a business phone line plus a listing in the phone directory . . . except it also provides a means of communicating with your existing and prospective customers, not to mention a variety of other benefits.

First, it's the way more people are finding or checking out vendors, whether they're restaurants, contractors or any type of service provider. The more affluent someone is, the more likely he or she is to use the Web in this way. **A common attitude is that if you don't have a Web presence, you're not a real business.**

Chances are, **your competitors have or will soon get their own Web sites** and may lure away customers who could have been yours. And notice how many companies are putting their Web addresses in their Yellow Pages ads. Why? Because **a Web site can communicate far more information than any ad can.** Even a full-page ad in the Yellow Pages can't display testimonial letters, color product photos, moving images and sound—but your Web site can. And while your competition may be able to afford a bigger Yellow Pages ad than you, your Web site can be just as effective as theirs.

Second, think of your Web site as an electronic brochure. You can direct people to it on your business card, on a magnetic sign on your vehicle, in your store window and in any print, radio or TV advertising you do. **Web sites provide more up-to-date and ex-tensive information than brochures at far less cost.** And phone-in customers can see firsthand what you're talking about if you suggest they log on to your Web site.

Third, while you have a local service business, **a Web site may allow you to increase your earnings by selling online to existing or new customers.** Say you have a catering service and you've whipped up recipes people rave about—you can sell an e-book of "secret" recipes via your site.

Fourth, having a Web site means **you have a place to refer customers to for after-sale support.** For example, if you have a landscaping service and your customer forgets what you told him or her about watering Australian pines or loses the instructions, you can provide detailed information on your site. Take our word for it—they'll see you as the hero and expert you are.

While 29 million people may have stopped using the Internet last year, more than 30 million began using it. And, in future years, many people will either return to the Web out of necessity or become converts because it's easier and more convenient than operating their TV remote controls. With effort, it's possible to get listed on a search engine high enough to matter, but nothing we've discussed requires this. You may also obtain or trade links with national organizations and directories in your field as well as with local organizations your market turns to for information.