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Do Websites Matter?

BY TOM ANDERSON



Several months ago I was researching a service online. I came across a business from its Google ad. Following the link I clicked to a brilliantly crafted Facebook page profile. The design and graphics, messaging, and overall presentation were synergistic. The marketing drew me in immediately and held my attention. After clicking the LIKE icon on the Facebook page and reviewing previous posts by the company, I decided to click the hyperlink and go to its actual website.

As soon as the website loaded onto my computer screen, it was like air deflating from a balloon. To my disappointment, the website was more than four years old in design, outdated with information, content depleted and visually uninspiring. Had I been a customer on the hunt for this company's services, the very sight of its website homepage would have dampened any desire to retain the company. I felt like I'd been enticed by a poser, soon to discover the real deal (the business's digital identity) was bland and incomplete.

After this experience, I started to research Alaskan websites. The deeper I explored the Internet, the more I realized that my example is not isolated. Most companies and organizations doing business in Alaska have sub-par websites that are in dire need of improvement or complete replacement. I suspect it's a national trend, especially for small businesses but of concern nonetheless.

The question that popped into my mind thereafter was whether or not it's really that important to invest financial resources in a modern, updated, content-valuable website. Further, I thought about how I would counsel a prospective client on web design budgeting and what a website should look like and entail.

And the most important question I weighed, appropriate to all customers: Does a website matter? Read on to find out what to do if you have a website, want a website, or are assessing if it's even necessary.

Audit Your Current Website

First, I need to be transparent and fully disclose that the public relations and marketing firm I manage offers consultation and design of websites. Our design director, Sarah Paulus, is one of the best in Alaska, particularly with website audits.

Assuming you have a website already, an audit is imperative because it allows you to determine what is missing, lacking, outdated...and also what is on-point and working.

In your audit you should make sure your content and imaging (photos/graphics/designs) are optimized with key-word rich

titles and paragraphs. This enhances search engine optimization (SEO) when someone is looking for the service or product you provide. Geo redirecting is also something that can be measured (website traffic management on your site that ensures when a visitor comes to your site so you can automatically redirect them to the most relevant content). Internal linking within your website is also invaluable, with some experts suggesting each website page should have as many as one hundred links (external and internal).

Usability design is also a key. A website is your business's storefront on an international scale. The ability for your audience to know what you're selling, where you're located and how to contact you is all based on good design and website functionality.

The ease of use of a well-thought website with intuitive buttons and link placements not only creates a positive user experience, it also reflects on how your business is perceived. A clean, easy-to-use website is a success marketing machine for your business and audits search and highlight deficiencies.

There's more to be measured and analyzed, such as microdata (creates a communication between your content and search engine spiders), meta and title tags, security and firewalls and basic comprehensive website design and architecture. And let's not forget the non-technical content you can personally spot, such as outdated photos, video links, news and information in conjunction with obsolete details and captions.

An audit of your website is the first step to deciding the next step.

Free vs. Fee

Whether or not you have a website active, my first inclination is to urge you to never use a free website service nor build your own homepage and layers. I recommend using a professional. More often than not, a free or cheap website's layout, positioning and design are evident to most people (i.e. clients/customers). As professionals in the design business, all we can do is roll our eyes and hope that your storefront and product trump the weak presentation you're projecting online. And think about it: Would you use crayons for your own storefront signage or spray paint your vehicle decals? Probably not!

When it's free or cheap, you get what you pay for. I believe it's best you hire a professional, preferably local (in Alaska) or one credible outside Alaska in the United States, with a documented reputation. I would be cautious in using international firms with virtual assistants and IP addresses in the Philippines, Pakistan, India and other hotbeds where techies are abundant but unethical practices and criminality are too. It's not worth the risk and you're liable as the proprietor of the website.

A U.S. website designer/consultant can at least get you on the right track. Online website services are growing in popularity, but they're comparable to do-it-yourself medical and legal websites. You're putting yourself into the hands of a computer program most often, with minimal real-person expert assistance unless you pay. The national domain and hosting companies like GoDaddy, DreamHost and BlueHost also offer website design and building, but this advice and help is almost as tenuous as the free sites. Those of you using them can challenge my belief, but juxtaposed to local website designer work product, your site will come up short through national hosting companies and may not be less expensive in the long run.

Price point and services rendered are relevant for website, but "free" loses this battle nearly every time.

Should websites cost an arm and a leg?

Costs vary, and candidly, I've seen some outrageous proposals for website revisions, renovations and building from foundation to finish.

Nearly 50% of our website clients in 2011 and 2012 came to us because they were dissatisfied with a local (Anchorage) web designer who charged too much for a simple to moderately technical website build. The complaints were

exacerbated by glitches in the operation of the website, lack of guidance and training by the design company after launch, and then the exorbitant fees to get help when the website was operational and needed revisions, tweaks, or content added/removed. Most felt ripped off and abandoned.

I'm not willing to give a set pricing scale for website design because it truly varies. Yet, there are considerations to be made when you contact a firm or web designer directly. Please keep them in mind.

(1) Does the designer have a portfolio and can you review past and current website projects.

(2) Is the designer an artist or graphic designer, or purely a technician, and with what credentials. Also, is the work done locally or do they outsource?

(3) What, exactly, are you receiving for the fee you'll be paying? Make sure there is an itemization of what will be performed and that you don't agree to pay everything upfront (e.g. there is a huge difference between a landing page, a basic website and an eCommerce website, as is there a difference in what a business or organization may need in a website).

(4) How easy is it to contact the designer with questions and concerns, and what's the hourly rate for such help.

(5) What do previous clients say about the website designer/firm. Ask colleagues what firms/designers they used. Research online what you like in websites.

One alarming aspect to the cost factor is that I see large-scale businesses, flush with capital and marketing budgets, erring on neither updating nor improving their websites. The same with non-profits, particularly trade associations for industries that have members who expect a professional and representative presentation, yet their trade organization's website is disjointed, sparse and borderline high school quality. If you have the money in your marketing and digital technology budgets, don't be a spendthrift when it comes to web design.

The beauty of my opinion - and that's all this blog represents, is that after a relatively short time in the advertising and graphics/website design arena I've seen how extreme some advertising/design companies can be when imposing fees on clients purely because they know (or "think" they know) something the client may not. I also have seen how, despite a fat budget, websites are overlooked by the best and the brightest in industries. They pay little for their "digital face" online and get little in return, or website and graphic design fees are unethically bloated.

The good news is that the digital world in Alaska has a solid core of honest, fair and talented designers with fair fees. Just make sure you do your research.

Bottom Line: Keep your arms and legs for selling your product and not for website design, but don't be shoddy with your digital imaging.

What information should you have on your website?

This question is somewhat subjective, but most of us in the design field would agree on essentials.

You may not have a website yet, so this next section is a guide for development. If you have an active website, within your audit and after - in the remedy/revision stage, consider the following:

1. **Logo/Title.** Vivid and clear name recognition/title/headers and logo. Hire a good graphic designer for goodness sake!
2. **URL name.** Please don't choose a domain name that doesn't make sense or is not connected to your business or organization's name. The rule of "the shorter the better" also helps because you can tether to an email account and longer URL addresses are difficult to recall.
3. **Contact information.** Phone, email, fax address, ancillary websites, organization names and titles.

4. **Detailed content.** Informative, relevant, helpful content that is not confusing or verbose. Use good photos, graphs and images and update them.
5. **Aesthetics.** Incorporate pleasing pages and architecture (color/font/flow) so maneuvering is pleasant and user-friendly. Did I forget to mention hiring a good graphic designer? :)
6. **Clear navigation.** Don't make the user get lost in burdensome or complex pages and hyperlinks.
7. **Social media integration.** Link all of your social media profiles, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Google Plus, through portal icons (hyperlinks).
8. **Security.** Are you selling online? Secure your site with an SSL certificate which encrypts communications and information/data transfer between you and your clients.
9. **Mobile application.** Make sure your website can be expanded through smartphone (Apple and Droid) and handheld tablets (IPad, Kindle, Nook, Microsoft's new Surface).
10. **Extras:** *Blog* for messaging and updates/commentary; *Graphics and animation* to enhance likability and interest; *Press page* for media alerts and releases, and to publish articles/new coverage; *Frequently Asked Questions* (FAQs) to answer queries that may not need to be covered via email or phone call directly to you/staff; *About us* page which gives details on you and your staff (hopefully with updated photos and contact information); *Portfolio* page to show what you've produced or accomplished; *Testimonial* page - let happy customers and clients brag about your stellar performance; *Hosting* – lots of companies provide hosting services no matter who designs your website.

When it comes down to importance, you need as much positive identity and reputation online as you do in person. A website can be the foundation, if not a springboard, to success.

Granted, websites can be taxing because of the amount of initial design and content management (and cost) necessary to start the process, but it's worth it for the image and vitality of your business/organization.

From online visibility to marketing to promotion, it's never too late to make your digital presentation respectable.

Just look at the numbers. As InternetRetailer.com recently reported in mid-November 2012, U.S. e-commerce sales through websites reached \$56.99 billion in the third quarter, up 17.3% from \$48.59 billion for the same period a year ago, according to figures released by the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Does your website matter? Count your profits on it!

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