



THE PLAIN DEALER

Clear sited

Your business Web site is too important to leave to amateurs

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Shaheen Samavati
Plain Dealer Reporter

Annette Hudson was uneasy about hiring a friend from church to design a Web site for her new online business.

But his low fee of \$1,500 and three-month completion time estimate were just too good to pass up.

Her gut feeling was right -- nine months later, barely any work had been done on the interactive fitness site. Hudson said she had no choice but to take her friend off the assignment.

What he designed "was just extremely low quality, nothing even close to what we had in mind," said Hudson, a personal trainer in Tacoma, Wash.

After the setback, she did her homework and chose a company called Taoti, which had an impressive portfolio and gave her more realistic estimates of \$20,000 and four months.

Hudson said it was worth the investment. She's happy with the site, MyFitnessTrainer.com, and says about 200 people have subscribed to her virtual personal training service since it went live last year.

Aaron Geh, vice president of sales and marketing for The Karcher Group, a North Canton Web design firm, said anyone with a computer can claim to be a Web designer.

"Our biggest competitors are guys that have full-time jobs and do Web sites at night," he said. "They can provide a cheap product and maybe decent quality, but when it comes to ongoing maintenance and customer service, they're not there when they need to be."

Having an impressive Web presence today is critical for most businesses, said Anita Campbell, chief executive of Smallbiztrends.com, a Medina site that tracks developments in small business.

"People are doing more and more searching for their local vendors online," she said. Not having a Web site, or having one that looks unprofessional, can drive customers away.

"At one time, having a Web site was seen as a bit of a novelty, but those days are long gone," she said. "It's really become almost a threshold of stating, I'm a solid, substantial business.' "

Many business owners underestimate what it takes to create and maintain a professional Web site, Campbell said. Here are some tips on getting it done right:

Know what you want

A strong vision and plan from the beginning will make it easier to determine how much you will need to spend and who should do the job.

Pricing can be all over the map, Geh said. The cost could range from a few hundred dollars for a very simple Web page to more than \$100,000 for a complex, interactive site with hundreds of pages and custom software.

It all depends on what you can afford and what you want out of the site.

"If you're a local deli and your menu doesn't change much, your main goal might just be to get your information online," said Chris Winfield, president of 10e20, a New York Web design and search engine marketing company. In that case, a very simple Web site might do.

Hudson determined early on that she wanted her site to have a registration mechanism, online forms, message boards and other complex features. The company she hired in the end helped her build on her ideas to better reach her goals.

“Just like anything in life, you get what you pay for,” Geh said, noting that the more reputable the design firm, the more expensive they’re likely to be.

In general, he said, most smaller business owners can expect to spend at least a couple of thousand dollars for a site with a handful of content pages and professional presentation.

They should also expect to pay a monthly hosting fee to store site content on an Internet server. The price for that can range from about \$20 to \$200 per month depending on the size of the site.

Do your homework

Six months ago, when Dennis Burnside decided to start a Cleveland market research firm called Burnside Analytics, he knew the Web site would be a key part of the new company’s marketing strategy.

After talking to several local firms, he decided on Clevelandbased DigiKnow. His Web site is expected to launch this month. Campbell said it’s a good idea to hire a designer with whom you’re able to communicate in person. Burnside said he has met with DigiKnow staffers regularly since they started working on his Web site about three months ago.

When shopping around for a design firm, Campbell suggests asking other business owners for recommendations or searching listings of reputable technology organizations, such as NEOSA, which promotes the advancement of the information technology industry in Northeast Ohio.

A simple online search would work, too.

Once you identify a few prospects, take a look at sites they have designed. Geh said you should pay attention not only to the presentation, but also to how long it takes things to load and whether the sites are easy to navigate.

And make sure to ask for references, Winfield, of 10e20, said.

“Anyone can say they designed Amazon.com,” he said. “So you want to talk to Amazon.”

Comparing prices is also important. One company might charge \$10,000 for a product you could get for \$3,000 somewhere else, Winfield said.

Be professional

When it comes to the design of your site, it doesn’t need to be overly flashy, Campbell said. It’s important that it portrays your business well and includes all the basic information that people would be looking for about your company.

“A nice, clean, professional presentation is critical as well as the site being easy to use,” Geh said.

Having out-of-date or incorrect information posted can frustrate customers, said NEOSA spokesman Brad Nellis. Business owners shouldn’t underestimate their Web site’s impact, he said.

“Anytime you’re looking at working with a new client, one of the first things they do is check your company’s Web site.”

Promote your site

Business owners should realize that if they build a Web site, visitors won’t automatically flock to it, Geh said.

“Just like a brick-and-mortar business, you have to promote the heck out of it,” he said. “It’s something you definitely have to be proactive about.”

Most important, the site needs to be built in a way that search engines — such as Yahoo, Google and AOL — can find, he said.

In other words, if someone searches the name of your company or the product you sell, you want your Web site to be one of the first links that pops up. To make that happen, you need to have the right keywords on your site in the right format. Sites with a lot of flashy graphics and videos, and less text, are likely less searchable.

Campbell said it’s something you should discuss with your design firm.

"The good ones will think about that, but not every Web designer will," she said. "You need to ask."

Other ways to drive visitors to your site include paying for sponsored search results, which show up higher on the search page, or buying online advertising on related Web sites.

Keep current

Craig Chamberlain and his business partner, Rick Maselli, of North Canton, are working with The Karcher Group to create an online resource directory for homeowners and contractors.

"The site has grown substantially in concept as we've gone along," Chamberlain said.

Once they launch their site — www.showroom411.com — later this summer, they expect The Karcher Group to continue to develop it and add features. The company will also provide Chamberlain and Maselli with hosting services and statistics on how the site is performing.

"Some business owners don't realize that having a Web presence is an ongoing process, not just a one shot deal," Geh said.

That's why it's so important to find a company that you feel comfortable with in maintaining a long-term working relationship.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter: ssamavat@plained.com, 216-999-4331

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