

“Small Business Web Site Success”

*A comprehensive guide to hiring a web designer,
saving money, and avoiding headaches
down the road.*



This easy to read guide will show you:

- The various types of web site systems available.
- The design process from A to Z.
- How to avoid the pitfalls of selecting a web designer/company.
- Realistic expectations of costs and ongoing expenses.
- How to create an action plan that delivers results.

Prepared by
AutoWeb Technologies
for Prospective Clients

We are an information driven society...

In March 2005, roughly half of all American homes were equipped with broadband technology. By May 2008, broadband technologies had spread to more than 90% of all residential Internet connections in the United States. When one considers a Nielsen's study conducted in June 2008, which estimated the number of U.S. Internet users as 220,141,969, one can calculate that there are presently about 199 million people in the United States utilizing broadband technologies to surf the Web. If you own a business, not having a web site to reach these potential customers is a liability.

So, what are the key components of a successful Web site system and why do so many companies fail to market their site effectively?

First, let's discuss the various types of Web site systems...

Brochure Web sites

These are more than adequate for 95% of small businesses. This is the most basic type of Web site. Most times, these sites include a home page, company information page, product/service pages detailing what you offer, contact pages with forms for visitors to request more information, etc. You may also include a gallery of work you've done if you are a service oriented company. Another popular feature on a brochure web site is a "blog". These are online journals where the company can post daily, weekly, or monthly ideas, insight, and articles that can benefit visitors. These can drive traffic to your site and lend tremendous credibility in your field. They also raise your quality score with the search engines.

E-Commerce enabled Web Sites

These sites are a little more advanced than your basic brochure site. They include all of the features of a basic brochure site, but also allow you to sell your products and services online. They also allow you to accept credit cards as forms of payment which can help boost your cash-flow instead of traditional methods of payment.

Information Portal Web Sites

These sites are among the most advanced Web sites you can use in your business. Generally, these sites can do just about anything. Not only can they do everything that brochure sites and E-commerce sites do, but they also allow a Web site to be interactive with data sharing and collaboration among users and groups. They basically allow your site to be fully interactive and allow users to gather, display, or manipulate information. Very powerful...and somewhat expensive. A good example of a database driven Web site would be EBay®, Facebook®, or Monster.com®

From Concept to Reality...

Here are the steps to expect during your project when doing business with any competent web designer/company :

- A. They should create a detailed needs analysis to determine what type of Web site is right for your particular company's situation and budget.
- B. They should ALSO (and this is very important) create a detailed plan to market your Web site in conjunction with your other marketing efforts. How will they drive traffic to your site? Once there, what will they do to make sure these visitors are enticed to become prospects for future business?
- C. They should then create a detailed proposal, written in an easy-to-read format.
- D. Additionally, your proposal should have samples of work and client references or links to this information for viewing on the web.
- E. If you feel comfortable with moving forward, you can expect to pay a deposit of usually no more than 50%. Never provide more than half down on any project. Also, expect a signed copy of the proposal/agreement by both parties.
- F. A build interview is conducted where all pertinent aesthetic details and content is acquired for the site (what color scheme will be used, overall flavor of the site's layout, what contact information is to be used on site, navigation, what other Web sites company admires, etc.).

- G. You'll then need to provide collateral materials such as your logo, brochures, flyers, etc. If you don't have these items, can they create them for you? This all aides the designer in creating an accurate Web site whose theme is consistent with the rest of your company's overall message.
- H. The next step is where the design firm creates a prototype layout/mockup for client to review. This usually will be a screenshot of what the home page and interior page layout will look like. At this point, it is very important to provide specific feedback to the design team. Don't be shy here! If you don't like what you see or have edits, speak up!
- I. Once a final layout is approved, the programming team programs site with specific language to bring site to life. This is where the Web site has buttons and navigation that are functional as well as any other multimedia/Flash programming, backend programming functions, email gathering capabilities, content management system programming, interactive chat systems, etc.
- J. If selling online, the site is also programmed to work securely with a payment gateway system that interfaces with the client's bank account or Pay Pal® account.
- K. Content is added to site. This refers to all of the specific text, thumbnail images, items in store (if selling online), item descriptions, pricing, shipping details, etc.
- L. The Web site is then shown to client for content editing and final aesthetic adjustments.
- M. Site is programmed with specific search engine meta tags. This is specific language, not visible to the naked eye, that all of the major search engines look for when indexing your site among the millions of others. This is a very important step.
- N. Site is programmed with Web site statistics tracking software. This allows you to see who is visiting your site, what pages they are viewing, how long they're staying, and how they found you.
- O. Email accounts are setup to match the domain name that will be used (yourname@yourcompany.com)
- P. Site is published live to the domain name chosen (www.yourcompanyswebsite.com)
- Q. Site is submitted initially and on a regular basis to all major search engines and local search directories as well. If you choose to pay for traffic (which is a good idea for some companies),

- your campaigns must be created and actively managed and adjusted.
- R. Finally, the Web site is finalized to client along with documentation outlining site details, customer ID, customer support information, email addresses, instructions for viewing Web site statistics, and any other technical instructions that client might need for administration on their end.
 - S. Training is provided if necessary.
 - T. On-Going support and assistance should be provided.

This is a big list and this might seem like a lot of work. Guess what? IT IS!

Building a professional online presence takes creativity and patience, along with a knack for programming. Also, having excellent multi-tasking and communication skills are a must. You must work with a company with a proven track record, attention to detail, a systematic approach to project management, and above all...EXCELLENT CUSTOMER SERVICE.

With that being said, here's what to AVOID when selecting a web designer/company:

- A. This is the most important – REFERENCES and a deep PORTFOLIO. Unless they've built quite a few Web sites in a variety of industries, you'll be sorry. Make sure they have real references from clients that they have worked with. Make sure the references are from real people with real companies....not their buddies or friends. Make sure the quality of the work they've done is on the level of what you are looking for. Remember, if you end up with a sub-par Web site, it can actually do more damage than good. Your customers don't need any excuses to leave your site because it looks bad or is not easy to use.
- B. Do they have a professional Web site themselves? I cannot stress this enough. If you are entrusting a company or person to build your online "image", is theirs professional as well? Is it well written and easy to navigate?
- C. Are they accessible? Do they have toll free numbers to reach them, a physical mailing address, and several methods of

- contact? Do they return your calls and inquiries on a timely basis?
- D. How long have they been in business? What insurance do you have against them closing the doors because they can't run their business well?
 - E. Do they communicate well? Make sure that they provide written documentation of what they will do for you, what the costs are, and a timeframe for completion? Don't rush them, but it should not take more than a few weeks to build a professional, basic web site that can work for your company. E-commerce and database enabled sites take longer, but still hold them to task and **GET EVERYTHING IN WRITING!!**
 - F. How are changes made? Building the site is only half the battle. Do they provide changes? Are they extra? How much extra? Can they provide an online method to make changes yourself?
 - G. Do they have strong abilities with the various search engine programs? Can they manage any Pay-Per-Click campaigns you might have with Google, MSN, Yahoo, Superpages, or Yellowbook?
 - H. Do they have an online method for you to access your email accounts on the "fly"? Sometimes, you may need a way to get your email while traveling or working remotely.

So, here's the million dollar question.....

How much does a professional Web site system and plan cost?

There are two levels of expenses you can expect:

- A. The initial fee to build the site.
- B. The ongoing cost to host it on a server, submit it to the search engines on a regular basis, keep any software it uses updated, and for making changes to it or providing a platform for you or someone in your company to do it yourselves.

If you are given a quote of \$500 or less for a professional, online presence, and they tell you that hosting is your responsibility hang up the phone and move on. You'll be sorry if you don't.

The salaries required and infrastructure (servers, software licenses, etc) to keep a legitimate Web site services business functional are not

cheap. If you're getting a quote like that from a designer/company, you are not dealing with a legitimate operation that has a well grounded business model and bright future.

You'll be lucky to get the project completed as promised and on time, yet alone whether or not they'll be in business next year, next month, or even next week!

The bottom line is cheap web sites get cheap results.

You only get what you pay for...

It's true and we all know it. If you can find a company that you're comfortable working with, meets the criteria we discussed previously, and is priced within these guidelines, your chances of success are very high.

Industry averages:

Basic brochure site with 25 pages or less, search engine submission and optimization, email accounts, hosting, support, online site editing, the works....

Build fee – Prices range from \$1000-\$4000, generally.
Reoccurring monthly fees - \$40-\$100 per month.

E-commerce enabled site with all of the above plus a store with around 100 or less items, encrypted shopping cart, search engine submission and optimization, email accounts, hosting, support, online site and store editing, the works....

Build fee – Prices range from \$1500-\$5000, generally. More items, more expensive to build because of the extensive labor involved loading items into the store with accurate descriptions, pricing, etc. (Note: some providers may have an easy, do it yourself system that you can use to load your store once the main site is up and running. This can save big \$\$\$)
Reoccurring monthly fees - \$80-150 per month.

Information Portal site with all of the above functionality, plus whatever dynamic capabilities/data manipulation is required, written in an Open Source language or .NET platform.

Build fee – Prices range from \$5-\$25000, generally (prices vary due to the variety of different needs for projects like these)
Reoccurring monthly fees - \$80-500 per month.

**You'll notice the costs vary significantly here because of the wide array of what can be done and what might be required. Every project is truly unique.

So, what do you do now?

Try to keep your agenda simple:

- A. Shop around, but don't always choose the cheapest vendor.
Remember, this is a 24/7 version of your company for the world to see and evaluate.
- B. Ask for references and portfolio
- C. Get it in writing
- D. Communicate regularly with calls, emails, feedback, etc.
- E. Promote your Web site with everything your company does including brochures, direct mail, business cards, letterhead, email signatures...EVERYTHING.
- F. GROW YOUR BUSINESS TO THE NEXT LEVEL!

And, remember, we're always here to help in any way that we can.

*Sincerely,
The AutoWeb Technologies Team*