

Does YOUR business *really* need a website or not??

By Myriam Dyck

You may have been asking yourself this question for some time now, wondering whether it's really necessary to go to the additional expense and learning curve of joining the World Wide Web like so many other businesses are doing. Will it generate more business and revenue, or is it just a bunch of hogwash that only makes money for all those technical wizards you would have to pay?

The answer is... it depends. On what, you ask? On the type of business which you run!

Let's say you have an agricultural production business where you sell honey each year. Should you already run out of honey after 2 months of selling each year, there is no point in trying to generate more and faster sales of your product – you will just run out sooner. You would have to be prepared to produce 10, 20 or 100 times as much produce each year (and sell year-round) before you required additional methods of selling to larger markets! If you are already selling most of what you can produce with your existing methods of marketing and you do not wish to dramatically increase your production, you do NOT need a website.

Now, let's say you have a chimney sweeping company. You are managing to keep yourself busy with your existing means of promotion, but your company is not really well known despite the fact that there are many other houses in the area which probably require servicing. Such a business COULD be expanded by hiring another part-time then full-time employee, and if there is a large enough client base in the geographical area you could conceivably develop it into a full fleet of chimney sweepers servicing the entire city! A business such as this definitely should include a website in their business plan, along with other methods of promotion in keeping with their proportionately expanding advertising budget as business picks up.

The main functions of a website for this type of company would be:

- 1) Information about the business;** many consumers now “check out” companies online before dealing with them. In those consumer's eyes - if the business can't be found online... well they can't be very well-known or have been around long can they? This is a good chance to promote how long you have been in business, what areas you service and what services you offer, your rates and special promotions, as well as how to contact you and where your business is located.

You can also use your website to make your other print marketing and directory listings short and sweet – you don't have to include as much information about your business and take up expensive square inches of advertising – just list your website address and prospective customers can look you up online.

- 2) Get yourself found;** many customers now search for service providers and business using the Internet, not just the Yellow Pages anymore. You would promote such a business so that it is "locally" findable by Internet searches, i.e. "Winnipeg Chimney Sweeping" not just "Chimney Sweeps".

Now let's say that you have a tractor parts sales company. You can fairly easily keep up with your local demand through a store and some tractor enthusiast magazine ads, but you would like more business. NOW we're getting into the type of business where you REALLY need a website! If you get a good website put up which is maintained regularly so that it lists new and/or used specialized parts which you have in stock and can ship and a way for the customer to easily contact you to order from anywhere in the world, you can dramatically increase your sales volume.

Your website would have the same functions as in the chimney sweep company example above, as well as:

- 3) List your products for sale;** by fairly detailed listing. Don't just say you have "Used Tractor Parts" – say you have "Case Parts", "International Harvester/IH Bearings", "Ford 9N Starters", etc. Many consumers will type in exactly the part which they are looking for in an Internet search, and generally this yields some results. Only if they do not find what they are looking for do they broaden the terms for which they are searching.
- 4) Provide information on how to order and shipping;** say whether they need to email you or phone you to find out if you have it in stock, or just fill in a simple online request form to automatically and instantly order. Make it clear what geographical area you are located in with some general idea at least of what shipping and taxes the customer will need to pay. For your own sanity; lay out your return, cancellation and warranty policies.
- 5) Taking payments:** If you take under 50 orders per day from the website (in addition to your regular business) or if you need to check whether you have parts in stock or can get them before you commit to an order, you do not need to bother with setting up an online payment system. This would require online credit card processing and secure data transmission of customers' information.

IF you know for sure you can stock and supply for all orders *and* you are going to be taking 50-100+ orders per day from your website, you will want to automate the payment, ordering, shipping and shipping notification process. This is actually fairly simple to do, although someone from your company will have to get up to speed on computerized accounting and customer data tracking to link up to the website system. If you are selling this much, you can afford it – as a matter of fact, you can't afford NOT to! The sheer paperwork involved with an extra 1000-2000+ orders per month done manually would involve a lot of man-hours to deal with...

So, in order to answer the question of whether YOUR business requires a website:

- a) determine which type of business above most closely matches yours.
- b) determine whether you are comfortably getting enough business now or whether you want to expand your business into new markets.

You should now have enough information on which to base *your* “Yes” or “No” decision.

Read next issue’s article on “How to Decide What You Actually Need (and stay in control!)” followed by “Whirligigs and Doohickeys – How Fancy Do You Want It?”

Myriam Dyck is a local freelance website designer from Richer, MB who is providing this information as a public service for business owners to assist the community. Articles also available online at www.dyckwebsites.com