# How to Decide What YOU Actually Need in a Website?? (And stay in control!)

*By Myriam Dyck*

When you first talk to a technical person about getting a website, they are likely to fire off a series of questions at you that are pretty much guaranteed to make you feel like a total ignoramus about computers and the Internet!  This is, unfortunately, pretty much guaranteed *even if* you know a fair bit about them – because when you answer some questions right they get all enthusiastic and fire off some really high end technical questions assuming you must know about those too!  Some people do it because that's how they speak every day to other technical people… some do it to show off how much they know.  Neither reason helps *you* have an intelligent conversation with them.

So what do you actually *need* to know as a business owner in order to maintain some control over the decision-making process?  Obviously you will be required to decide certain things.  What are some of the basics?

Let's go through some of them:

1) **What do you want to call it?**  The best thing if possible is the name of your business.  Because website names, known as "domain names", such as "www.eggbeaters.com" or "www.tastyhoney.ca" are actually "addresses" on the Internet, they cannot be duplicated.  Just as you can't have two houses in the same town addressed as "24 Elm St.", neither can you have two "www.bobstomatoes.com" websites in the whole world.  So a domain name has to be available and you have to register to own rights to that name for a time period before you can claim it for your site.

   Normally ".com" is used for commercial sites, ".ca" is used for Canadian sites, ".org" is used for organization sites and ".net" is used for network sites.  There are newer ones now too such as ".biz" for business and individualized country abbreviations.  Sometimes .com is not available but .ca or .biz is available, in which case you can use one but be careful with this – if the .com site is a competitor of yours, you may end up sending people who saw your site name to their site by mistake because everyone thinks of .com first!  In this case, it would be better to pick a totally different name.

   It usually costs between $10 and $30 Cdn per year to register and have a domain name, depending on the name and whether you register for multiple years or not.  You don't want to lose it after you promote it, so it's better to get at least 2-3 years.

2) **Where do you want your website to live?** Your website needs to have a home where it will be looked after.  The Internet is a network of interconnected computers, many of which are there just as "hotels" for other people's information files.  In many of them, passer-bys can come along and stare in through the glass walls to see the

information.  Other hotel rooms have solid doors and locks, so you need to have a key (password) before you can see their information (members-only sites for example).

Your own business computer *could* have your website living in it, but then it would have to be connected to the Internet 24/7 for people to come by and look into, and also have some special programs and functions installed.  This is a lot of hassle, so generally you pay long-term guest rates for your website files to live in someone else's commercial computer hotel.  This is called "Web Hosting".  You want an affordable package which is tailored for how much traffic you expect and whether you will need special security features for online ordering or not.  Make sure the company is long-term and established – you don't want to find out that the company closed down a month ago and your site is totally gone!

Large impressive numbers on data storage and so on are of no use to you if you are putting up a small site and don't expect thousands of visitors per week – concentrate on reliability and affordability.  It is a very competitive field and you can find decent companies for $100-150/year Cdn with everything a small business will need, often including your domain name registration for the year. You can ask the website designer to find and set up a web host company for you, but ensure that they have tried that company before and are not just acting themselves as a reseller for the "new flavour of the month" company.

There ARE "Free web hosting" companies out there… most of them are not worth it - they are only free because they sell advertising and then flood your customers with pop-up ads and annoying junk when they try to visit your site.

3) **How big do you want it to be?**  Websites generally have some "standard" pages, namely "About Us" (a description of your business) and "Contact" (how to reach you/where you are).  When a person goes to your site, the first page they see is called an "index" or "Home" page.  This is the most important page of your site.  First impressions are key.  If the page takes forever to open up, only has a picture saying they need to click something else to see your site, or doesn't say anything about your business – you've lost that chance to make a good impression and you're likely to just lose the customer right there.  They will go look for someplace else better, there are many other sites out there!  The number of other pages necessary after these 3 totally depend on your company, products/services and how much detail you want to go into.

Our chimney sweep company from the last article would be perfectly satisfied with about 5 pages such as index, "about us", "contact", services/rates and customer testimonials/satisfaction info.

Our tractor parts company may want to say on the index page that they sell new and used parts for all types of tractors, then have customers click on the make of tractor for which they are looking for parts. There could be a page for 13 different makes of tractors saying what types of parts are in stock that month for that manufacturer.  So now we're at 16 pages.  IF there are new and used parts for each of the 13 different

makes of tractors and you want to list them separately, you can have them click on "new parts" and "used parts" for each make, thus resulting in 26 pages for the parts plus the index, contact and "about us" pages (29). A site which has multiple product categories and sub-categories could get much larger.

If you do some rough "flow charts" yourself you should be able to estimate how many pages you would like your site to have. The most financially-friendly way to have your site built is to then look for a "website package" which states the number of pages included for a lump price, which generally works out better than paying a flat rate per page.

4) **What language does it have to be in?** English you say… In website building terms, this has to do with the complexity of the programming of each page. The longest-established and easiest is called "HTML" (simply, it's a code used so that all the computers on the internet recognize and show web pages made with this language in the same way). Such a page is created and stays the same – it is saved as a file in a computer the same way as you would type up a letter and save it in your computer – only prettier and with pictures! Each file/page stays the same until someone goes in and changes it, then re-saves it. This is perfectly adequate for the chimney sweep company and the tractor parts company's new and used parts monthly listings.

When you start having to search a database of parts or having a very large number of items, you need a more high-end programming language – the pages don't stay the same, they have to shift depending on the data in the database. This becomes a "dynamic" website. You can expect to pay a fair bit more for a dynamic site, as there is more behind-the-scenes setup and the designer has to have more education.

5) **What do you want it to look like?** This comes down to YOUR personal taste. You should poke around some different websites and see what you like. Do you like uncluttered, simple sites with lots of pictures and not much writing? Do you like special "cutesy" graphics themed to the nature of the business? Get some general idea of what *you* like and then choose a website designer whose portfolio reflects your taste. If the last 7 sites that person/company built are all black with flame graphics, don't expect them to do a plain white site with blue clouds for you! *They* won't think it looks good! And check out the competition – you want yours to look better than theirs!

There is a wide range of artistic ability available – some designers can build a whole database system, yet don't know how to create suitable pictures. Some designers just use cookie-cutter templates trying to mass-produce websites. Some take the time and effort to create a unique impression for each site they do. You don't have to design it yourself, but your website will give the impression of your business that customers get so choose a look that reflects how you want *your* business to come across. If the design will be voted on by committee… try to establish agreement beforehand on what everyone thinks would be good or it will end up getting redone several times (to the great frustration of your poor designer!).

*Read next issue's article: "Whirligigs and Doohickeys – How Fancy Do You Want It?"*

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