



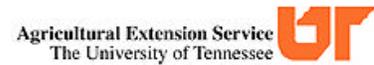
Creation of an Internet Presence



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In today's computer-savvy society, if a consumer cannot find a specific business or product on the Internet, they believe that it does not exist. This is due to the common misconception that ALL businesses have a website, also known as a webpage. And while many do, it is not necessarily a requirement for success. Some types of businesses and products are a better fit with the Internet than others. For instance, individuals are more likely to surf the web looking for information and products related to consumer electronics than for a carton of milk or stick of butter. However, it is important to remember that this school of thought could change in the blink of an eye as consumers' tastes and preferences change.

Why Have a Website?

It is important to understand that websites can have several different purposes. Most purposes fall into one of these three categories:

1. Educational — provide facts, statistics, studies, literature, etc. related to a specific topic, industry, concept
2. Informative — provide product information, customer information, warranty guidelines, contact information, etc.
3. E-commerce — provide a secure place where consumers can make purchases online

Creation of a Website

Development

Having a presence on the Internet begins with the development of a website. There are two main ways that this can be handled.

1. A website can be created by an individual using software that can be purchased at office supply stores. This software tends to be user-friendly and it provides instruction and tutorials to aid the user. This option tends to be inexpensive and allows a business owner to have complete control over the design, look and content of the website. However, it is also important to understand that learning the in's and out's of an unfamiliar software program may take some time, thereby increasing the amount of time devoted to website creation.
2. The second way to create a website is to hire a professional website designer. This person will take information given to them and design a website based on that information. This method tends to be more expensive than creating it using a software program. Also, often times a professional designer may not fully understand the concepts or ideas behind the specific business or product. This may lead to the creation of a website that does not fully portray those concepts and ideas. If this avenue is chosen, it is important to establish a good relationship with the designer and play an active role in the creation of the website.

Hosting

Once the website has been designed it must be hosted. What exactly is web hosting? To have a web site for the world to see, the website files have to be located on a web server — a computer that stores web files. Essentially, web browsers (e.g. Netscape Navigator & Microsoft Explorer) talk to web servers to retrieve and display websites on a computer screen.

There are two ways that an entrepreneur can gain access to a web server — 1) a web server can be purchased 2) space can be rented on someone else's web server. The decision to purchase a web server also comes with the commitment of labor and money to support that server. There are capital expenses for hardware and software that must be paid up front. A website address (a.k.a. domain name — www.yourcompany.com) must be registered through one of the numerous companies offering this type of service. In addition, if one doesn't already exist, a high-speed internet connection to the web server will need to be obtained and kept accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Such permanent connections are expensive. Website visitors will need and expect the web server and website to be constantly available. They will come to count on it.

If the decision is made to rent space on someone else's web server, someone with these capabilities will need to be located. These providers usually have one or more powerful web servers that are available to be shared by several businesses. These web servers allow each website to appear with its own website address. In addition to powerful web servers, web hosting providers should also have a fast connection to the Internet.¹

Search Engine Submission

In addition to having a website designed and hosted, it should be repeatedly submitted to search engines. A search engine is the tool that a person uses to surf the web. Search engines are programs that search documents on the Internet for specified keywords a user enters and return lists of documents where the keywords were found.² If a website has not been submitted to a search engine, then it is unlikely that the search engine will include the website in its search results. Website submission is a relatively easy process. Once at the homepage of a search engine, follow the link to their website submission page. There should be instructions describing the process that must be completed for submission. Remember to periodically resubmit the page, especially when updates are made.

Marketing a Website

A website is not a "build it and they will come" type of marketing tool. In order for a website to have a positive impact on a business, effort must be put toward its marketing and promotion. Time and money must be spent making current and potential customers aware of its existence. If this doesn't happen, then it will quickly become an ineffective tool.

The website address should be placed on all printed materials (i.e. brochures, envelopes, pens, pencils, T-shirts, hats, product labels, etc). This helps to keep the website fresh on consumers' minds. It also makes the website address easily accessible to those interested in finding more information about a product or making a purchase. The consumer can pull out the brochure, look at the free T-shirt, or read the website address off the label in the refrigerator.

Before deciding to dedicate effort and funds toward creating a website, it is important to be well informed and knowledgeable so that it can become a positive and important part of the business. This could take the form of reading books, talking with professionals, or attending seminars and workshops. Just as a new office building would not be built without doing extensive research, a virtual office should not be built without giving it the same relative amount of consideration.

¹ Net Impact Web Hosting - <http://www.netimpact.net/hosting/tutorial/t10.html>, March 19, 2002.

² Webopedia — The #1 Online Encyclopedia Dedicated to Computer Technology - http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/s/search_engine.html, March 19, 2002.