

Copy by Amy@AveryWrites.com

Business column:

“Do I really need a Web site?”

(Originally published in North Carolina magazine)

Q: *All kinds of businesses—from barbers to builders--and even specific departments at my workplace are building Web sites. Do I really need a presence on the Web? What are the advantages and costs?*

A. Like so many other business decisions, whether you jump on this bandwagon or steer clear of the crowd depends on your market, goals and budget. For most businesses, however, the answer is, “Absolutely, you should have a Web site.” Like business cards and phone listings, a Web site is one more must-have marketing tool. And it doesn’t have to be expensive.

“Business card” Web sites

For many small businesses, there’s no reason to have a big beautiful, expensive Web site. Your site might just need to communicate some simple facts. For a plumber: “We can fix your leak; here’s our number; call us.” For a consultant: “Here’s what I can do for you. Here’s who I’ve done it for. Here’s how to reach me.”

According to a Nielson/Net Ratings survey, almost 70 percent of people say they would call a phone number listed on a “business card” Web site like this, so-called because it carries just the basic contact information. But if you’re not on the Web, they can’t call.

Put Web sites to work

Web sites can offer much more than just basic information, however. One machining company in N.C., for example, uses its site to introduce its services, capabilities, and even employees to prospective customers. A “staff” page shows pictures and contact information for a large number of key personnel—an important feature for this international company, since their customers can’t usually meet them face-to-face. In addition, the company’s Web master reports that their simple “contact us” page generates five to 10 prospects a month.

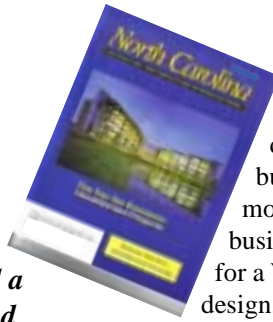
Virtual reality

How fancy should your site be? “You are what I see online,” says one expert, talking of perceptions customers have based on a company’s Web site. If you have high-end services with a national clientele, you obviously need an internet presence that reflects a high level of professionalism. But some companies with local customers need Web sites that are just as impressive. For example, a customer sitting at his computer will compare the local credit union (CU) to the big banks, all based on the Web site.

Take a look at your competition. If their Web sites are expertly done, you might need to step up your game.

At what cost?

The expense to build and maintain an effective Web site depends on your market, their expectations and your skill level. The process is time-consuming, however, no matter who does it. If budgets are tight, start small and add to it over time.



Design: If you have a high comfort level with computer software, check out the free do-it-yourself software and fee-for-service design that many hosting companies offer. Professional designers can create basic Web sites for small businesses for about \$500, plus \$250 per year for monthly changes to Web page content. Mid-sized businesses can expect to spend about \$6,000 per year for a Web site. These costs usually include only the design, not the writing, or “Web content.”

Writing: As with design, you can write the content yourself. But if you’re not a professional writer, marketer or don’t know much about the Web, a professional Web writer can help you create a more customer friendly, customer-focused website.

Web hosting: After the writing and design are complete, you’ll need to register your domain name (your dot-com, dot-net, or dot-whatever), and post your website. This you can do yourself, also, but using a web hosting service is a whole lot less time-consuming. Prices start at about \$120 a year and might include free design software and templates.

Hidden costs: If Web design and marketing are not your profession, doing it yourself might be false economy. You could lose more in productivity—time away from your own business—than you save in hiring a professional. The old saying holds true: “Spend money to make money.”

Web designers say that development and maintenance costs do deter some companies from building Web sites. Paradoxically, these same companies will pay an equivalent amount for a one-time placement of a small newspaper ad, and hundreds of dollars a month for telephone book ads—though the internet offers so much more.

Information gathering, giving

Web sites offer dynamic benefits for your business, compared to ads and other print materials—and sometimes for a comparable price:

- **Real-time tracking of customers’ interests.** If you know which of your Web pages your prospective customers are visiting, you have actionable information with which to increase business.
- **Quick change.** Use your Web site to highlight services that are relevant to your best customers and to your business goals. For example, highlight a new service or product, then remove it when you sell out or book up.
- **Personal attention.** Give your existing customers personal treatment by providing password-access to specific Web pages for updates on product orders, progress on a project, or reports specific to their interests.
- **Make it a package.** If you use print ads to feature a product or service, put the ads on your home page linked to more information, so your customers can find it easily.

Your customers are on the Web. Go find them, and give them what they’re looking for.

To get started with an experienced Web writer and marketing consultant, please visit my Web site: www.AveryWrites.com/WebsiteWriting.