


Get web wise

ARE YOU HAPPY WITH YOUR WEBSITE? DOES IT FAIRLY REFLECT YOUR BUSINESS? IF THE ANSWER IS NO, YOU'RE NOT ALONE. ROSS BENTLEY EXPLAINS HOW TO MAKE YOUR SITE A 'MUST-CLICK'

 Your website is often the first encounter customers will have with your business. So even if you have a brilliant business, you need a decent website to back it up.

Yet a recent survey of 200 small businesses by website software company Mediasurface found that 60% feel their website does not match their company brand.

So how do you take your website to the next level and get it noticed above the competition?

Mike Cogan is director of IT consultancy Equinus. He says you must put yourself in your customers' shoes and look at your site from their point of view. Better still, take a couple of trusted clients out for a coffee and ask them to be unashamedly blunt about what they like and, more importantly, what they don't like, about your website.

"Also look at what your competitors do well online and what you like about some of your favourite websites. They don't have to be in your sector, any good website might have elements you could copy," he says.

Many small business websites are 'static', with a limited number of pages and no way for visitors to interact with the site. This amounts to simply putting the company brochure online.

The problem with this basic type of website is that it doesn't take full advantage of the technology available. Why not make your list of products or services searchable, says Cogan.

This can be done by adding a content management system (CMS). This will allow you to upload images, prices and product information onto your site. It will also let your customers search the site.

Cogan recommends a CMS called Squiz. But a full Squiz package, including technical support, costs around £25,000, so you may need some cheaper options.

Robin Porter owns web design company Arpey Internet. He says a more basic but more affordable CMS option for smaller businesses is a software

package called Macromedia Contribute, which costs around £100.

If you want your customers to be able to buy things through your site, you need e-commerce software. AmenWorld offers an e-shop package for as little as £9.99 per month, which will get you up and selling on the internet quickly and easily.

If you really want to impress your customers, add a video or blog to your site. Porter reckons these will create an extra way to interact with visitors that will keep them coming back for more.

This isn't as pricey as you might think. The success of video-sharing websites like YouTube means that for many people internet video is now part of everyday life. And because videos can be hosted on these sites, they are very cheap to build in.

Porter says videos can be a great way to demonstrate products. He recently worked with a company that manufactures protectors for boat propellers. The firm has now put a five-minute video on the company website to show customers how the protector works.

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"If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a video could be worth a thousand more," he says.


Video can also be used to keep a visitor at your website for longer or to build up credibility with customers. For example, at online eating out guide Sugarvine, sales director Paul Williams suggests a restaurant could include a series of short video clips of their chef preparing meals.

Blogs can also give a website a human touch. A fashion retailer, for instance, could use an online journal to discuss the latest trends. A financial consultant could muse about the implications of the Northern Rock saga or the latest interest rate rise.

Global top 10 most visited websites – and what makes them great


1 www.Yahoo.com
 A 'web portal' – basically a way into the internet – allowing you to search, run an email account and see snippets of news. Best of all, you can customise this site so it shows the information you want, in the way you choose.


2 www.Google.com
 Innocent search engine or potentially the planet's most powerful spying system? The debate continues but Google carries on regardless. In October its shares hit a record \$700. Google is brilliant at strategic moves, like its new alliance with networking sites Bebo and MySpace against mutual rival Facebook.


3 www.YouTube.com
 You upload videos onto this site. It's that simple. And the world is mad for it. A classic example of so-called 'user-generated content'.


4 www.MSN.com
 Another web portal, home of Hotmail and owned by Microsoft. Last month Microsoft bought a minority stake in Facebook for \$240m.



5 www.Live.com
 Microsoft again. Windows Live is the brand name for a set of Microsoft services and software. Most are web applications, accessible from a browser, but some are applications that need installing. An impressively simple site.



6 **www.MySpace.com**
It brought us the Arctic Monkeys and was the first social networking site to make it big. Again, this site is all about user-generated content: blogs, videos, interest groups – and most importantly, music.

7 **facebook**

www.Facebook.com
If you've recently had a (virtual) sheep hurled at you, then you'll be one of the 50 million people using this social networking site. No one seems to know why they're on it, all we know is that we're addicted.



www.Wikipedia.org
The big question about this user-generated online encyclopaedia is, can we trust it? Well, one source says: "Wikipedia is generally as accurate as other encyclopaedias" – but then again, we got that off Wikipedia...

www.Hi5.com
A social networking site so far untainted by big corporate beasts. With Rupert Murdoch's News Corp buying MySpace, and Bebo linking up with Google, it will be interesting to see if hi5 stays independent for long.

orkut
www.Orkut.com
Google's social networking site. Aims to better Facebook and MySpace by allowing people to set up forums. Particularly big in Brazil...

By Roxane McMeeken.
Top 10 provided by Alexa,
a web information company

The web is full of free blogging software that, according to Porter, can be configured to run from a website for about £200.

But be warned – it's hard work. Drew Griffiths, a director at design agency eMosaic, says that once you start a blog or news section, you must be ready to keep it up to date. A site where the last blog entry is six months old will look stagnant – and you don't want people thinking the same about your business.

"A website must be treated like another member of staff. You need to keep it involved and provide it with on-going development," he says.

You also need to get your site to be found by search engines, like Google and Yahoo. Marcus Green, managing director at Toolkit Websites, says: "A lot of people start their search for a service or product at Google."

There are two ways to approach this. Either structure your site around how search engines work or bid for specific keywords or phrases so you appear high on the sponsored links rankings.

The former method is known as search engine optimisation. The SEO approach involves links to other websites, creating lots of fresh content and the constant repetition of keywords. But it is a complex practice that Green says will be beyond most small businesses.

"There's a myth about SEO being free, but it actually requires an enormous amount of work to get right," he says.

Much better to concentrate on bidding for a number of key terms, says Green. This approach is called pay-per-click. You pay an agreed amount – anything from one pence upwards – every time someone clicks through to your website from a search engine.

Green advises companies to be exact about the search terms they pursue. Try and bid for the term 'yoga' and there will be thousands of people after the same word but if you bid for 'small yoga retreat in East Yorkshire' you should have much less competition.

"And the more specific a term a person clicks on, the more serious they are about buying the product," says Green. ▶

HOW WE MADE IT ONLINE Tips from owners of successful websites



Will Wynne, founder of flower delivery site
www.ArenaFlowers.com:

- Even before you build your site, identify keywords that need to be used throughout the site to make sure search engines find it
- Use the web to offer something different to a non-web business, don't just put a catalogue of your products online. On our site, if someone buys expensive flowers, they will be shown a champagne offer; if they buy cheaper ones, red wine comes up
- If you can afford it, get a web developer to build your site, rather than buying off the shelf
- Give your site personality – use good colours and design, and a blog.

Peter Thornton of
www.VroomVroomVroom.co.uk,
a car rental price comparison site:



- Keep your site fresh – customers like it if you keep updating it and so does Google
- Display a phone number – people like to feel there is a real person behind a website
- Make sure you offer something different to what customers get from a shop, such as a searchable product list and useful links.
- Keep the site as simple as possible.

Fashion site gets makeover

With Paris Hilton and her ilk never far from the fashion pages, Los Angeles has become a beacon for British fashionistas. This inspired Rachel Hollis to launch small London-based online fashion retailer www.LAstarstyle.com. The site sells clothes and accessories from California to the UK public.

Earlier this year, Hollis was worried about growing competition and the need to stand out. So she took the decision to revamp the website.

“Our old site was successful but was looking a bit tired,” she says. “The LA celebrity fashion scene has really taken off and several competitors have emerged, so we needed to raise our game.”

Using statistics on how long people had spent on the site and at what point they left, Hollis and her colleagues drew up a list of the changes needed.

“We felt the site wasn’t interactive enough and because the shopping function was a bit slow a lot of visitors were bailing out at the checkout,” she says.

They took their requirements to a number of website development companies. Hollis says: “There are a lot of companies out there who say they can build you a website but they’re all coming from different angles. It’s important you spend a lot of time choosing the right company for you.”

Web design company Arpey Internet was picked. Within four weeks they had integrated an improved e-commerce system with the stock system, added a blog, and revamped the design and navigation of the site. Hollis won’t say what it cost, but says by shopping around she saved 60% off other quotes she was given for the work.

She says: “We worked very closely with Arpey Internet and we had input at every stage. Our brief was comprehensive and we went as far as sketching out on paper what we wanted the website to look like.”

QUICK (AND CHEAP) WEBSITE FIXES

The web offers small businesses a host of exciting software that you can add to your website at little or no cost:

- If you want to include video on your website, try using www.YouTube.com to host it
- Numerous sites help you set up blogs for free, such as www.WordPress.com
- Google has free applications that can be downloaded. Google Analytics for example, tells you where your visitors come from and how they interact with the site
- There are websites that allow you to build your own site very cheaply. See www.Names.co.uk, which allows you to drag and drop different layouts and develop a website for around £100.



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RACHEL’S VERDICT ON THE REVAMPED WEBSITE:

The design of the site is now super clean – we have a ‘trends bar’ across the top and search option on the left-hand side.

People are spending more time on the site and going through to buy because they find it easier to use.

The new blog is also helping to attract more visitors. Plus, it’s very useful to know what reviews and stories are popular with visitors as this helps us to choose products they like. We are thrilled with the new site.

Above left: the LAstarstyle site was looking tired...

Above right: the revamped website features improved navigation and ordering, as well as a new logo and fresh images of celebrities such as Paris Hilton (left)

