



Peter Thurner / Web Designer

[How Your Business Can Benefit from Having a Website](#)

I've heard the excuses a million times:

"I'm just a tiny business... Why would I need to build a website?"

"Designing a website sounds like so much work... Would it be worth it?"

"I don't offer any service or products so I don't need one."

"Why bother? My customers probably won't even look at it."

The truth is, many if not all businesses should have a website. This isn't to say that you need a long, complicated website with tons of functionality or fancy animation. Some businesses do just fine with a simple informational website that's between 3 and 5 pages long. That length covers all the basics: a home page, some information about your company, a page about your services, contact information, and perhaps information about the types of clients you serve or testimonials from happy clients.

With just a few pages, you can have a website that gives your business tangible benefits such as:

1. Giving new contacts an easy way to learn more about you. When you go out networking and meet a new prospect, how can they get more information about you? Calling to follow up—along with leaving voice mails and playing phone tag—is certainly more work for many new contacts than just jumping online. Visiting your website may help a new prospect to learn more about you, easily, on their terms. And that may help you convert more leads to sales.

2. Making updates easier and less expensive than printed materials. Instead of updating text, redesigning a marketing piece, trying to make new content fit the new layout, and then printing (and paying for) new material, all you have to do is rewrite your content and integrate it into your website. You can also update certain areas on your own website. This can take the need for a designer to update your site out of the equation. Updating your site yourself makes it easy and inexpensive to ensure that your website is always accurate and you never have to apologize for it being outdated. Of course you can get your designer to update the site for you as it's quicker and more convenient, and it allows you to concentrate on your business.

3. Providing a place for all the information you need to answer prospects' questions. Printed materials limit the amount of space that you can devote to text, product photos, or informational graphics. A web page can include more content than would fit on a letter-sized piece of paper, especially because readers can scroll down if you have more to say. It doesn't take a significantly larger investment to add two pages, rather than one, to a website. This is not to say that your website should go on forever, but you can take the real estate you need without worrying about the cost involved in printing a larger format document or more pages.

4. Making your company look professional and established, while extending your brand. A website can help your business make a full and positive first impression. Instead of prospects who are disappointed that it's difficult to find out more about your business, you'll have happy potential customers who can easily get their questions answered. And if they get those answers from an attractive, well-written, easy-to-use website, they are more likely to form a good opinion of your company. That good opinion can go a long way toward making a new prospect feel comfortable about your expertise and credibility and want to hire you.

5. Helping you find and connect with new clients. Creating a website can extend your marketing reach beyond your city—and even outside of your own country. If you have a product or service that you can deliver over the phone, online, or even by mail, you can open up new territories that you'd otherwise have to reach by

direct mail. Just think of all the new clients who could become available to you. And through search engine optimization (SEO), your website can be there when your prospect is actually looking for the product or service you offer. It's easier to make a sale to a prospect that wants or needs what you offer rather than trying to convince them that they need what you have.

6. Enabling you to hit the business goal you're reaching for. For example, your website can also help you sell products and services with an online shopping cart, grow your contact list through a newsletter sign-up, answer journalists' questions through a press room, or educate potential clients through an articles section. There are many other things that a website can do for you—so talk to your designer about your specific business goals and creating a website that will get you there.

These are just a few of the benefits your business can gain from a website. Of course, it takes an investment of time and money to get a website designed, and occasionally maintained. But when you think of the project in terms of the payback you'll get, you can see that creating a simple website is well worth the effort.

[Pointers](#)

1. Decide what you want your website to do for your business. A website should be more than just something you have to create for your business. What's your site's purpose? What are its jobs? Who will be coming to the site? What do you most want them to do once they get there? What do your visitors most want to know? If you create the site with the end goal in mind, then your site will be more successful. This is because you can create every piece of the site to encourage the viewer to take a certain path through the site or a particular action, I like to call this the websites story. Planning the experience that a visitor will have on your site can help get more visitors to meet your goal on the site.

2. The function of your website will determine the types of content you'll need. Look at the job you want your site to perform, and who the site is for. That will start to give you hints about the types of content you should include on it. In planning your basic content, consider the pages you'll need to include on the site. Also think about any subscribe forms, shopping carts, audio, etc. that would help you communicate with your target audience. Lastly, think about which of these pieces you need immediately and which you can add in later. This will help ensure your website project won't take forever to start and complete.

3. Don't get hung up on writing the text. The next step is to gather your samples and write your text for the website. A lot of businesses get stuck in this phase of the project. This is because they're not comfortable writing, they don't have the time to write their text, or they find that it takes a while to get the testimonials they need.

This is the one part of your site that's easy to revise later on — so don't stress out about getting the text "just perfect" — just get the text put together and then plan on revising it shortly after the site is launched.

4. Design the site to look timeless. There's no way to know what design trends are coming next, and what effects would make your site look like it was designed in a particular year. Sites full of cutting-edge effects and technology this year may look passé next year. How do you design a site to look timeless? If you create your design based on your own logo and Visual Vocabulary and keep the design generally clean, the likelihood that it will look dated is lessened. Stick close to your own brand designs and you'll have a website that you can keep for the long haul.

[5 Easy Ways to Establish Your Brand Online](#)

The Internet is a practical and accessible tool to build your brand. Here, we list 5 of the easiest ways to leverage the Internet to your best advantage:

1. Own your own domain name.

A domain name is the "website address" where your website lives, and it is the last half of your email address. You can purchase your own business name, or a variation of it, as your domain name. If you haven't named

your business yet, it's a good idea to check the availability of domain names to match potential business name candidates. It's best if your domain name matches your business name.

2. Use that domain name as your email address.

You probably already have an email address from your internet service provider that looks something like: yourname@aol.com or yourname@sbcglobal.net. It looks much more professional to have yourname@yourbusiness.com as your business email. The repetition of your business name will increase your memorability and will help you build your brand. You can even forward your new email address to your existing email account if you don't want to go through the hassle of changing your email program set up. The disadvantage to this is that your old email will show in the "From:" field—so, in the future, you may want to set up the email program to not forward.

3. Create an email signature file to use on all of your emails.

This is a mini-advertisement that appears at the end of all of your email. Include your phone number, a short description of what you do, any current sales or promotions you're offering and your website address. You can even include your logo graphic in your signature file. This is an especially great tactic if you're a member of any email lists—your email will reach many people whom you don't know, and they may be interested in your products or services. Be sure to create and use your signature file when you post on online forums, as well!

4. Have a website designed and developed.

A website is a "must" in today's business world. Not only does it add to your credibility, it will also enable potential clients around the world to learn about your products or services. The most common excuse that people have for not having a website for their business is that they don't know what to include on it. But, you can start out with a website that consists of a single page. Everyone can write at least one page about his or her business. If you have difficulty writing one page about your business, try recording yourself talking to a friend or client about your business—it's often easier to tell someone your story than to start with a blank page. Or, you can hire a freelance writer to help you get your story online. We recommend that you expand your site to a five-plus page site as soon as you can... or start out with a five to six page website. This larger format allows plenty of pages to cover all the basic information about your service business. A product-sales based business requires a few more pages, mainly in the shopping cart and check-out capacities, but requires more development work.

5. Put your email address and website URL on all of your printed materials.

"If you build it, they will come" is unfortunately just not true on the web. You have to promote your website to let people know that it's available to them, and that you have valuable information housed there. The easiest and most immediate way to do this is to add your email address and URL to your printed materials wherever appropriate. Put this contact information on your business cards, printed articles, email, note cards and other correspondence. Make sure to include your website address on all your company's materials—letterhead, brochures, postcards, catalogs... you name it. The only place it is not appropriate is on envelopes or mailing labels; the postal scanners don't like it!

[Pages to Include in Your Website](#)

Building a Website may appear to be very complex, but it's really an easy process. The best way to start is by developing a site map of the pages and content that you want to include. This depends upon the type of business you have, and how informative you want your Website to be. Below is a list of sample pages for you to review while you plan out your site.

Essential pages

As a bare minimum, your business Website should include the following pages:

Home Page –

About Us - and, if appropriate, About Our President/Principal/team members.

Our Services — this is a listing of the different services or products you provide, along with a short description of each. If your products or services require more in-depth descriptions, link to separate pages for more information.

Contact Us — this can range from a simple listing of your contact information to a more complex "intake form", with a range of questions on your prospect's needs. Map to find you etc.

Create a different name for these Website sections if you'd like to add more personality to your site! For example, your About Us page can be titled, "Who We Are," or "About Us."

In addition to these basic pages, you may wish to include other pages.

Services- and product-based businesses require different types of pages.

If your company performs services for others, your business is a service-based business, and your site should include these pages:

Clients — your clients can be presented in terms of specific client names or a more general industry listing.

Testimonials — these can be on their own page, listed on the client page, or distributed throughout the site.

Request a Quote or **How to get Started** with your service

If your company sells products, your business is a product-based business. To provide your customers with quick and easy access to your products, your site should include:

Product Description(s) — Include photos, details, pricing, and "Add to Cart" capabilities.

View your Shopping Cart

Check Out

Adding credibility

Once you have these basic pages, the next step is to add credibility and information to your site. PR, news, and information pages can do this for you, providing visitors an incentive to return time and time again.

News — Include current as well as past articles on your company.

Pressroom — this is for press releases produced by your company.

Newsletters and/or Articles— these are written by your firm or principals and help provide you with "expert" status, as opposed to articles written by outside sources.

Media or Press Kit — this area would contain a company backgrounder, logos, photos, and tools that others may use when writing articles about your company.

Video Clips— According to Web trend forecasters, a video testimonial is quickly becoming the next hot item for building credibility.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ), or Ask the Expert

Additional business pages may also be appropriate, depending upon the type and size of your business:

Company Mission

Company Vision

History

Case Studies

Why Choose Us?

Bios of your Team Members

Jobs or Opportunities

Map and/or Directions

Events/Classes/Workshops — this page would include details about, as well as the schedule of and sign-up for various company events open to the public.

Downloads — these are PDFs, brochures, presentations, and software demos or programs.

Statistics Research or Studies — either conducted by your firm, or related to your firm, clients or industry

Pricing — if you sell products, your pricing should be listed in your shopping cart. For service-based businesses, whether or not you list your pricing depends upon the standards in your industry; you don't want to price your services on your site if you don't have to.

Additional Information Pages

Recommended Books — linking these to a reseller account through Amazon.com can generate extra revenue for your business.

Resources — other services that are compatible with yours, or links to places online where you can learn more.

Links — exchanging quality links with other sites can be a good way to increase your search engine rankings.

We hope that this list is helpful in your website planning process!

[Your Website Must Match Your Other Marketing Materials](#)

At first glance this sounds obvious — that your website would look like all your other marketing materials. Of course that's just something that would have to happen, right? But I run into many businesses who want to break this rule. Creating a website that looks significantly different from all of your other marketing materials just tends to be a bad idea. I'm going to review the most common reasons I hear for breaking this cardinal rule. Then I'll tell you exactly why doing so would hurt your brand rather than help it.

The 4 reasons that I hear most often from businesses are:

The web allows you to use as many colors as you want, without paying extra. Many forms of printing still charge per color of ink used and using more than 2 or 3 colors can get very expensive for businesses.

However the web allows you to use all the colors that you want, for free! Many businesses get very excited about this. They use every color they can think of throughout the site. And sometimes, they choose not to use the 2 or 3 colors that they've used in their print materials because they're sick of them. This results in a website that doesn't look anything like their other designed materials. This creates a "disconnect" for clients who come to your site from a reference of another piece.

For example imagine someone's looking at your business card designed in black and red. Then they go to your website where there's some black and red, but also bright blue, gold, green and a touch of purple. They may think that the website belongs to a different company! It makes your visitor wonder if they're in the right place. And that can make you lose their trust.

A better way to use color online is to use the wider palette of colors available as secondary colors. If your printed materials are mostly blue and gold, that doesn't mean that you have to use only blue and gold in your website — but they should be the main colors used. Adding in highlights of khaki or green can look very nice and add more visual interest to your website. But if you choose green to be your main color for your website, it will be confusing.

Also, make sure that the extra colors you choose fit in with your brand. Make sure they communicate the messages you want to send out about your business. In other words, don't choose more colors just because you can. Make sure that there's a solid design reason and the psychology behind the colors you're adding to your palette makes sense. Another way to add more color online is full-color photography. Stock photography is quite often free or relatively cheap and accessible to even the smallest businesses and can add a lot of pep and pizzazz to your tired colour palette.

Many businesses get bored with their designs, and use the web as an excuse to "mix it up". If you've had your materials designed for a while, it's not uncommon for you to be bored with them. No matter how innovative the design or how excited you were about it when it was created, this can happen. This boredom comes because you see your own marketing materials almost every day. Whether it comes from printing letters on your letterhead, handing out your cards at a networking event, looking at proposals with your brand on them, walking into your office and seeing your logo on the same old sign every day, or giving presentations off of your PowerPoint template — you see the same thing over and over. And it's natural.

But I can almost guarantee you that unless you've been in business a very long time or you've been harassing your clients with constant marketing mailings, you're the only one who's bored of it.

Deciding to take a different design direction on your website is bad for your brand. It is bad because you need your site to be instantly recognizable as yours. Web surfers have notoriously short attention spans — if they click to your site, and it doesn't look right, they'll be off and away to another site in the blink of an eye. They won't stick around to read your content, look at your logo, or to spend the time to figure out whether they are, in fact, in the right place.

Some businesses think that websites must have a certain type of design element to look up-to-date and modern. It's true that your site does have to look clean, professional and well-designed. But it's not true that your website has to have one particular type of design to look current. Your site doesn't have to have textures, rounded corners, drop shadows, 3-dimensional styling or animated motion effects. Only use those effects if they reinforce and communicate your Brand Definition to your audience and are a part of your Visual Vocabulary.

Just using these elements because it's cool and "of-the-moment" isn't something that I recommend. It will dilute your brand and move your website away from the rest of your Visual Vocabulary.

If you're thinking of creating a website that looks drastically different from your other designed materials for any of these reasons, consider the consequences before moving ahead with a different design. It's often more valuable to have a matching website that extends and reinforces your brand than to create a design that looks too different.

[Why Isn't Your Website Working Well?](#)

One of the biggest problems that small businesses face is ineffective websites. A website is often one of the largest start-up marketing expenses for a small business; unfortunately, many small businesses never see a return on that investment.

Why do most websites have this problem? The average starter website typically:

Is not well designed. Sometimes websites don't match the rest of your designed materials or, worse yet, are designed using a template that looks nothing like any of your other materials, because they are off the shelf and not custom made.

Tries to accomplish too many things on each page.

Has little or no information of value to your potential clients. Most websites are written all about you and your business—not them and their needs and concerns.

Lacks calls to action. You have to give your visitors clear instructions on what to do and how to proceed.

A small business's website should perform a few basic jobs. It should:

Extend your brand.

Answer your prospects' most-asked questions.

Help you to grow your prospect or contact list.

Convert your prospects into clients.

Your site can easily do all of this and more. To get started, there are three main elements of the website that you have to address:

Content

Overall, the content, or text, on your website is the single most important element of your website. This content gives:

Interested prospects a place to learn more about your services and to get their burning questions answered.

Current and past clients a resource for at-their-fingertips contact information and in-depth information about your offerings.

Internet search engines some content to index. The search engines read only the text part of your website, not the graphics. So choose a few keyword phrases, and use those throughout the text on your site. Hopefully, your keywords will help your site to rank well!

Design

The design of your website should be consistent with the rest of your brand identity and marketing materials, so that it can extend your brand identity into the online forum. Be sure to include, at the very least:

Your Logo: This should tell the story of who you are, what you do, and what makes you different.

Your Visual Vocabulary: This is all of the visual elements, in addition to your logo, that make up your business's look and feel. This includes the fonts, color schemes, photography, shapes, backgrounds, and other elements that you use.

It's important that your Logo and your Visual Vocabulary be used consistently throughout all of your marketing materials. If your website looks markedly different from your other materials, then people who have your printed marketing materials might feel like they've landed in the wrong place when they call up your website.

Your site should also have:

Appealing information design: Having text content on a site is key, but your text has to be designed and laid out in such a way that it's understandable, easily readable, and compelling. Laying the information in quick bursts, such as bulleted lists, helps people to read your site quickly. And using headlines, subheads, and bold text to break up the content can also keep visitors interested enough to read all of the text.

Consistent navigation design: If your navigation changes from page to page, it will be difficult for visitors to find their way around the site—they can't tell where they've already been easily.

Function

The average small-business website is designed as just an online brochure. But the ideal website will do something else as well, such as:

Growing your contact list: Collecting the names of the people who visit your website and are interested in your services is a great way to create a list of contacts for your follow-up marketing (such as sending a newsletter).

Answering visitors' questions: Including answers to their most commonly asked questions can help visitors to get instant gratification from your site. Also, having a contact form can encourage hesitant buyers to ask the questions that will help them to overcome their buying doubts and fears.

Converting prospects into clients: Using calls to action throughout the site can help convert prospects into paying clients, as will giving visitors clear instructions on what to do next, paired with great benefits to compel them to do so.

If you address all of these main issues, then your website will be more successful than the average website. Instead of just being another ineffective marketing tool, your website will produce results, attract your target customers, and help you to close more sales.

How To Make Your Website Structurally Sound

You've decided to build a website. Great! Your first step is to determine its structure—the pages you want to include and the information you want provide to visitors. But how to begin?

Your first instinct may be to make your site different from everyone else's. After all, trying to differentiate your business is what you've been doing throughout your branding process.

Building a website is like building a custom home

When you create a custom house, you can arrange your floor plan however you want, paint the walls as you please and fill the house with furniture you love. Your goal is to create a unique space that stands out from everyone else's.

In the same vein, there are elements of your website where standing out makes sense. For example, the overall look of your site and your content should be different from other sites—especially those of your competitors. Differentiating your website is good for your small business—to a point. What you don't want to do is reengineer its basic structure.

Standing out isn't always the stable way to build

Underneath it all, even the most unique custom home has the same foundation and spacing between studs in the wall as every other house on the block.

By following underlying principles of construction, builders help ensure that the house is structurally sound. Why not use the same approach when it comes to your website? That way, your site is far more likely to work well for you.

To use site building rules, of course, you need to know what they are.

Rule 1: Do competitive research

Before someone sets out to build a custom house, they'll probably do quite a lot of research—looking at other houses, determining the architectural styles that appeal to them, and perhaps even checking out homes in the neighborhood where they want to build.

The same goes for your website. You need find out what you're up against. Once you're familiar with competitors' sites, you can make sure that your site will not only be different in the right places, such as look and feel and content, but that it will also be comparable and better in the right places.

Most likely, your competitors have been building their sites for some time—and probably updating them to answer customer questions and market their businesses more strongly. You don't want prospects to pass you by because your site doesn't answer an important question that a competitor has addressed.

Visiting other sites and making notes of basic structure, business information presented, customer questions answered and even relevant tools and articles gives you a jump start on creating a site that facilitates apples-to-apples comparisons.

Rule 2: Plan your site architecture

As you may suspect, planning your site architecture is like drawing up architectural plans for a custom house, where you plan just what you'll include and what will go in each space. For example, do you want a library? A formal dining room? And where will you put the piano? Similarly, for your website, you must decide the pages you'll include and the information on each page.

When planning your site architecture, think about what you'd like your website to do for your business. Do you want it to bring in clients and close sales? If so, pricing information and even a shopping cart can help do that. Do you need your site to get media attention? Then a Media Room might be the key. Make sure to include the pages and content required to get the job done.

In addition, think about how you plan to expand your website in the future. At the beginning, designing a website of more than 10 pages can overwhelm a small business—both in terms of budget and time required to write the content.

But, if you create an expanded site map at the beginning—a website wish list if you will—then you and your website strategist can determine which pages will be most important in helping you reach your goals. You'll also have a clear roadmap you can use to add on to your website as your budget and schedule allow.

Rule 3: Name your pages in a way that makes sense

Have you ever walked into an unfamiliar house and been unable to find your way around? You probably asked the host where the kitchen was so you could drop off your pot luck dish or the way to the bathroom.

On a website, though, visitors don't have the luxury of asking where things are. So you want to make it as easy as possible for them to find the information that they need.

Some small businesses want navigation button names to be clever or interesting. But, it's important to think about the website visit from your customers' or prospects' point of view. They often come to your site looking for specific information. Even if they're just browsing, they want an organized way to look around—where clicking a link takes them to the page they expect. Remember that visitors don't have a lot of time or the patience to bumble around your site.

You see the same navigation buttons on every site you visit for a good reason. Established usage conventions have trained visitors to look for names like "Services," "About" and "Contact" when they're out browsing around. Capitalize on this and your visitors will be able to find what they're looking for quickly—keeping your site and your business in their good graces.

Following these three simple rules makes it much more likely that your website is structurally sound and that your visitors will have a great experience there instead of a frustrating one.

[The Art of Website Maintenance](#)

Now that you've designed and launched your website, you have a powerful marketing tool for your business. But, your website is only as useful as the content is current. The process of keeping the content on your site current is called website maintenance, and it's important to keep both visitors and search engines supplied with new information. Just like regular maintenance on your car, you have to make changes on your website every few months to make sure that things run smoothly.

If you update the content on your website on a regular basis, potential clients will be drawn back to your site to find out "what's new". The search engines pay visits to websites in their queue regularly. The catch is that you'll stay in the queue only if you update your site regularly. If the search engines visit your site several times in a row, and don't find anything new, they may decide not to come back—which can be a blow to your search engine rankings.

So, when is it appropriate to update your website? You don't want to waste time and money nitpicking at your site if you don't have updates of real value to add. You should update your site if you've:

Grown your skills. Have you gotten a new accreditation? New licensing? Improved your skills? Any change in your skill set is a great reason to update your website—and your potential clients—with your new capabilities.

Expanded your products or services. Do you have a new offering? Add it to your website and start making new sales in that area.

Completed a successful project. If you've just finished a project, include it on your website. Create an online portfolio, add a case study—build a section on your website to use as a place to show the world your success.

Gotten more testimonials, or added to your client list. Including more feedback on your offering helps to build your credibility. Be sure to get a testimonial from each of your successful client projects. Updating your testimonials regularly will also show clients who have visited your site a few times that your offerings are "up to snuff".

Written an article. Writing articles is a great way to keep your website up-to-date and to put more content on your site. Search engines love content-rich sites, and visitors will love to see the new information. So, if you write articles to educate your clients and promote your business, be sure to place them on your website as well. They're likely to be full of keywords related to your area of specialty, which will help your ranking in the search engines.

Press releases. You should post all press releases and other information you publish about your company to your website. You never know who may be visiting, and you may get written up for your accomplishments.

Changes in your business. Have you hired someone? Changed your business structure, and you're now required to notify the public of that? If so, you should probably review your website and evaluate how you can add that information.

Yearly check-ups. You should do a basic check on your site at least once a year, to make sure that the content is current. Some things to check on include:

Your copyright statements should be updated yearly

Test and validate your links, to ensure that they still work

Your time references should be changed. If your "About" page says how many years you've been in business, this is the time to change that!

Your pricing and offerings—do you have new products or services? Have your prices increased over the past year?

Spotlight any major updates on your home page as well, so that people will learn of those updates as soon as they enter your site. The search engines will also discover the new update as soon as they enter your home page if you leave a bit of information, with a link to the full story, on the home page. That will act as a breadcrumb for the engine to follow—the engines will follow your link to learn more about it.

Any of these reasons, and dozens of others, are great reasons to make changes to your site. If you make keeping your website current a priority, it will pay off with better search engine rankings and increased sales and leads through your website.

Once you've decided to make your changes, the next choice is how to go about doing that. There are two steps involved in maintaining your site:

First, decide whether you prefer to edit your content on paper or online.

This can be done in a couple of ways. You can start by printing the pages that have outdated information and then updating that information on paper first. Or, you can copy and paste the outdated content from your website into a word processing program such as Microsoft Word and then edit that file on your computer.

After you have updated your text content you can choose either to make the changes yourself or to hire a web designer to make the changes.

This is where you have to weigh up the time taken for you to learn a new programme which enables you to update the website content yourself, against your ability and time restraints, obviously you may be too busy to deal with updates to a website and it may just be easier to pass updates to a web designer. Any updates to a website will either be chargeable at a minimum 1hr rate or this is where a maintenance/update plan can be put together to decide upon, what you envision being updated and how often. Pay as you go tends to be more economical, as you are only paying for a service when you need it.

By building more—and more current—information into your website, you will also begin to build trust with your potential clients, since they will have a snapshot of what's currently happening in your business and available to them. Your website can go a long way towards making sure that your online prospects know, like, and trust you—which can lead to more sales from your website. This could be in the form a blog; keeping people in the know about up coming events, or events that you have done, press releases etc.