# Small Business Websites That Work

By Sean McManus

This is chapter two of 'Small Business Websites That Work', a book that bridges the gap between website designers and managers in small businesses that need to direct their skills.

In the book, small business managers learn how to:

- spot common defects in the website design;
- make the website more profitable;
- differentiate the company on the Internet;
- promote the website effectively; and
- integrate the website with the rest of the business.

Website designers will learn how to build websites that make businesses more effective by learning to spot the opportunities to grow a company's profits and what implications these have for the website design.

This book was published in 2001 and is now out of print.

For related resources and details of my latest books, visit my website at www.sean.co.uk.

# Planning your website and creating the content

Nobody knows your business better than you do. If you don't tell your website designers how your website will improve your business, it will only be profitable by accident

# Introduction

With the promise of a global marketplace aching for your products, it's easy to be seduced on to the Internet. The cost of setting up a website can seem small compared to the potential benefits.

But stop and think. Why does your company need a website? The web is groaning under the weight of pages hastily launched that do nothing to improve their companies' businesses. Many of them cost a lot of time and money to create and maintain.

You must start by working out how a website can help meet your company's goals. This is not something you can leave to the last minute – it must be at the heart of the content, the design brief, the technology and the business processes.

You can outsource the development of your website (more about that in Chapter 3), but you must take responsibility for its strategy at a senior level within your company. Nobody knows your business better than you do, least of all your web design company. They won't have researched your market, so if you don't tell them how your website is supposed to improve your business, it will only be profitable by accident.

## Some bad reasons to have a website

**Internet myth**  you must have a website

Unless it's going to help your business, why bother? You wouldn't print a batch of brochures for the fun of it or exhibit at a show without knowing who's visiting. Be sure of how your website will help your organization.

Sometimes companies consider going online because 'it's about time' they did, or because there's someone on the team who wants to make it their pet project.

Companies often feel pressured by their competitors having a website. But your rivals could be investing a lot of money and suffering huge losses. It could strengthen your competitive position not to incur that cost. The money might be better allocated to advertising or improved customer service.

If you feel you need to have an Internet presence, consider the other reasons for having a website and the potential benefits first. Any site designed purely out of a feeling that there must be one is unlikely to lift profits much.

# Eleven ways your website can help your business

Here are some of the things that your website can help with:

1 Attracting new customers.

2 Enhancing your reputation.

3 Creating revenue streams.

4 Diversifying into new businesses.

5 Learning more about customers.

6 Enhancing print and radio advertising.

7 Increasing referrals.

8 Increasing your profits.

9 Developing brand loyalty.

10 Selling directly.

11 Improving customer service.

These ideas are discussed below together with the website features and the content you'll need to realize them.

## Attracting new customers

Your website helps you reach out to potential customers who couldn't find you before: they might come looking for you in search engines, or stumble across a link to your site. Once they're on your website, you have a chance to convert site visitors from all over the world into customers.

Your success depends on how many visitors your site gets and how many of those can be convinced to conduct business with you. Few people will buy on their first visit to a website, so you need to have content on the site that they will return for, giving them time to gain confidence in your business. Send visitors away with an arresting thought, a smile, some software or hot news. But always try to send them away with the thought that your website is worth returning to.

To draw more people in, publish information which potential customers might want to search for on the Internet and make sure that it can be indexed by search engines (see Chapter 9 to learn how they work). This information should be related to your business but not necessarily linked to your sales. While people are reading your articles, you have a chance to tell them about your company and your products so they know where to come when they need them.

If you broaden your website content from telling people about your business to telling readers more about their interests, you create an opportunity for more compelling promotions. Contrast the effectiveness of these two links:

'Click here for Jones & Co Legal Firm'

with

'Click here for a free company legal checklist at Jones & Co'

Here are some ideas for content you can use to attract new customers and remind them to come back.

### News and analysis

Your business might already have untapped information flowing through it. If you can capture the news about legislation, trading trends and technologies that passes through your team, you can publish it on your website. You can also publish one-off articles that explain aspects of the industry to newcomers, or update customers on what they might need to know. If you're sending a speaker to an industry event, capture their words and put a transcript or recording on the website.

If the technology behind your products will interest customers, you can write about that or even include a live view of the factory floor using a webcam. Customers shopping for bikes or confectionery

might be intrigued to see how they're made, and the article gives you a chance to tell them about your quality controls and what makes your products unique.

Whether people find your information using search engines or links is less important than the fact that it is tightly focused on the interests of your potential customers.

## CASE STUDY

### Aurora Luggage Limits

US luggage manufacturer Aurora Luggage offers travellers a guide to airline baggage restrictions. Website visitors can check the size and weight restrictions that airlines impose on passengers' checked and carry-on bags depending on the flight carrier, the destination and the type of ticket.
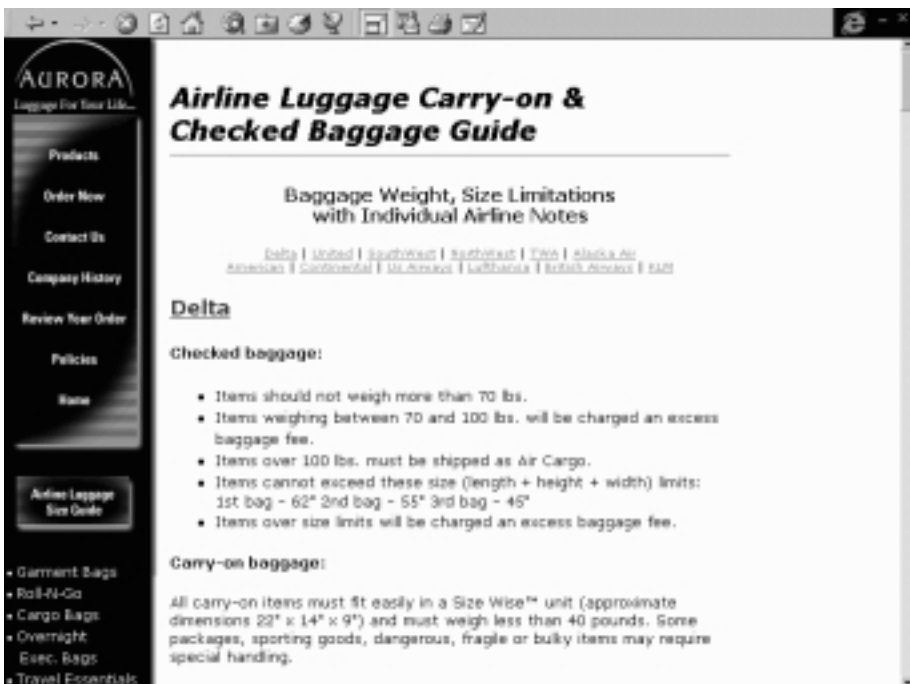
**Aurora Luggage's website attracts visitors looking for information on airline luggage restrictions, and gives the company a chance to promote its products to potential customers**

*Screenshot courtesy Aurora Luggage*

Costs associated with excess baggage are shown on the site where available. This enticing content brings visitors on to Aurora Luggage's website where they can browse the company's line of premium luggage and place an order.

The airline guide was promoted with a press release distributed through a newswire service to coincide with the holiday season (see Chapter 9 for ideas on getting press coverage for your website). Aurora Luggage's website is at www.auroraluggage.com.

### Print outs

As well as getting a presence on your customer's computer screen, how about getting one on their office noticeboard or fridge door? Create pages that are designed to be printed, and brand them with your website address for a continuous reminder to revisit the site. You'll have more success if your page has a white background and black text. Blocks of colour ravish colour printer cartridges and deter printing.

## examples

► You could offer troubleshooting tips for software, charts of bird outlines for ornithologists, the periodic table for chemistry students or weight conversion tables for cookery enthusiasts. Think of anything your visitors might need to refer to often while they work or engage in the hobby your business serves.

► You could publish a printable calendar including details of important events for your customers.

Make sure that any articles on your site print okay, or have print-friendly versions and that every page includes your contact details and website address.

## CASE STUDY

### The Midas touch

Children visiting Midas Entertainment's website can print out black and white line drawings of the cartoon dog Midas to colour in. The website promotes the illustrated book *Midas and the Little Red Airplane*. The site

has been designed as a safe environment for children, with no links to external websites. As well as the colouring sheets, the site includes games, e-cards, a free screensaver and weekly contests.

'We designed the website so that children can have fun with books and reading,' says Ted Afetian, chief executive officer (CEO) and creator of the Midas book series. 'The Internet has opened up a whole new avenue for small companies, especially self-publishers, to expose their art to the public.'

The website is at www.midaskids.com.



**Children visiting Midas Entertainment's website can print off pictures of the cartoon dog Midas which they can colour in**

*Screenshot ©2000 Midas Entertainment Inc. Used by permission*

### Shareware

The biggest problem for independent software authors is distribution, which is why they make their software 'shareware'. That means it's free for anyone to copy, distribute and try. But anyone who uses the

software after the trial period has to pay a registration fee. It's a low-risk distribution mechanism that enables a lot of software to be released that couldn't compete commercially for shelf space. Freeware is software that you're allowed to copy, try and carry on using without having to pay anyone.

You don't have to pay anything to include shareware and freeware on your website. There is such a wealth of shareware available that there is bound to be something you could offer your visitors – from recipe databases to mathematical modelling programs, music packages to word processors. There are plenty of games too, and you might strike it lucky and find something that touches on themes in your business.

You just need to find the software, put it on your website, and invite people to download it and try it. If it's freeware, you really can give people something for nothing. If it's shareware, you're still doing customers a service by collecting software they'll like (and ideally need) in one place.

Have software checked for viruses before you pass it on and make sure that it's worth downloading. If you pass on obviously broken software or waste download time with programs that don't fulfil their promise, customers will resent you and not just the software author.

You can find shareware all over the Internet, and there are sites dedicated to it at www.download.com and www.shareware.com. The site at www.nonags.com specializes in shareware that doesn't pester users to pay.

## Screensavers, wallpapers and skins

Screensavers are programs that start when a computer isn't used for a while and run animations on the display. Their original purpose was to prevent an image getting burned into the monitor, but with today's monitors they're mainly cosmetic.

You can get plenty of freeware screensavers and pass them on, but it's not that hard to have one designed for your company. The screensaver can include a promotional message for your website, but it needs to have something people will want to see on their screen too. You could get some cartoons commissioned or licensed. Animal photos and landscapes are popular if they have a good link with your

business (e.g. vets, travel services, motoring services, children's retail). Screensavers that throw up inspiring quotes or jokes can also be tailored nicely to most companies' needs.

There are shareware programs that will create screensavers that slideshow photos or bounce pictures around. Check that the package you choose allows commercial distribution. You could get something custom-programmed for your site, but this can be expensive, so be realistic about how much it will help your business and set a price accordingly.

Screensavers are just one way people can customize their computers. They can change the picture that appears behind their icons and programs (the wallpaper) and can often change the whole look of their software using so-called 'skins'. These skins reshape the program so that while it might do the same job underneath, it looks entirely different. All companies can benefit from getting a relevant (and funny) cartoon commissioned and turning it into wallpaper. Skins are recommended only for companies which know that their customers widely



**These are just four of the many skins which users of Freenetmonitor can choose to match the software's appearance to their taste or their mood. The program's function of reporting on the Internet connection speed is unaffected by its appearance. New skins can be downloaded from the website at** www.freenetmonitor.com.

*Screenshots courtesy of eSynch/Kiss Software Corp*

use a particular piece of skinnable software (such as the Winamp music player or Hotbar, a program that enables users to customize the look of Internet Explorer and which can be downloaded at www.hotbar.com).

As well as attracting visitors, screensavers, skins and wallpaper have the advantage that they remind customers about your website each time they see them.

### Product information

Sometimes customers will search the web for information on products they're thinking about buying. If you provide that information, there's a good chance they'll buy it from you when they're ready.

Brochures and technical documentation might be easy to find, but you'll need to redesign them (see Chapter 5 on what makes a good website design). Text split into vertical columns is particularly irritating on screen because readers have to keep scrolling up and down the screen to read it.

Avoid hype and use facts to sell instead. Don't just claim to be the best at something – find a way in which you can prove superiority and use that fact to assert your claim. It helps to use independent reviews or testimonials, especially if you link to them on other known and respected websites (e.g. leading industry magazines).

You can cut the work involved and make the site more of a community by giving customers the chance to review your products. Bitter reviews can still stimulate sales if customers realize they'll like a product for the same features the reviewer hated. This is a powerful strategy for retailers, but companies might be wary of posting negative comments about their own work and might find their supply lines cut by angry manufacturers if they fail to portray products positively.

## Enhancing your reputation

If you can become a respected source of information in your industry, it makes it more likely that customers will visit you first when they need to know what's going on. These research visits will spill over into sales and word-of-mouth recommendations of your company.

You can use your website to flaunt your expertise, especially in markets where this is an important part of the service sold, such as in

consultancy (publish recent reports), healthcare (give advice on avoiding illness) and accountancy (provide news on taxation online).

If it's going to enhance your reputation, your content must be updated regularly and reliably. Customers need to know they can trust you to tell them what's important as soon as you know. You need to be confident you have the resources to make this commitment. Reputations are tarnished by outdated content.

Nobody's going to respect your content if it's thinly disguised puff for your product line, or if it just slants the news to your company's benefit. Adopt a position of independence and either give your competitors equal prominence in the news or don't mention companies at all.

## CASE STUDY

### Symantec busts hoax viruses

Companies such as Symantec (www.symantec.com) that make software to defeat computer viruses are a good example of how the Internet can be used to enhance a company's reputation. Several of them have websites that detail the latest virus discoveries, so that people will respect that their software is also being updated regularly.

Symantec's site also reports on hoax viruses, which are scare e-mails warning of bogus viruses. This doesn't help its business directly (you can't protect your computer against an idle threat), but it helps its credibility and gives it more opportunities to promote its commercial products. The company has identified a gap in the information market and filled it, and it doesn't even require it to talk about products at all – neither its own, nor (more importantly) its competitors.

## Creating revenue streams

So far the mass market isn't ready to start paying for access to websites, but you might be able to generate subscriptions if you operate within a niche (probably business-to-business) and can deliver something exclusive enough to compete against the free content on other websites. Fees can be justified easily if readers can expect to recoup their investment by acting on your information.

Even if you can't make money by charging users, you might be able to sell space on the website to advertisers. Be careful before making advertising central to your business plan. Revenues are low and it will be difficult to break even unless you have content that will attract the mass market.

The content you choose needs to draw in readers and also keep them for as long as possible so that they can be shown more adverts. While people might tire of reading pages of text, websites that interact with customers will keep them longer, as this case study shows.

## CASE STUDY

### Fun with Funplanet

Funplanet (www.funplanet.com) in Sweden has found that its games retain visitors for between eight and ten minutes. The company sells advertising space above the games, partnering with other websites which host them and contribute attractive advertising audiences. The game pictured is *Splat the DJ* from a partnership with dance music brand Ministry of Sound.



**Funplanet created this game for the Ministry of Sound website where players use the mouse to aim eggs at DJ Fatboy Slim as he pops up on screen**

*Screenshot courtesy of Funplanet AB*

Players use the mouse to aim eggs at the DJs (such as Fatboy Slim shown here), who jump up and down randomly. 'People can get totally absorbed,' says Funplanet's international business manager Mark Williams. 'Before they know it, they've been on the site ten minutes.'

You might also find that a good quality newsletter (preferably about your customers' interests rather than just promoting your product) could attract enough readers to appeal to advertisers. But will these advertisers be your competitors and should you accept their money? See Chapter 6 for more on advertising.

## Diversifying into new businesses

Because a lot of the most successful websites have come from start-ups, some managers in small businesses perceive the Internet to be a fertile investment ground. They're encouraged by companies which sell services that depend on customers believing that they too could be millionaires and all they need is the right idea and the right technology.

It can be much easier to set up a new business online than it is off-line, where premises must be rented, travel times impose a tiny catchment area, and sales staff sit idle if customers don't visit for an hour. If you have been planning to enter a new market, the Internet levels the playing field and gives you a chance to compete with the industry leaders head to head.

But before setting up a website unrelated to your core business, consider what will stop richer and more experienced companies from stealing your idea and marketing it more aggressively than you can. In nearly all cases, you will reap a safer and higher return on investment by putting any spare money into your existing business.

## Learning more about customers

Customers will reveal much more personal information to you on your website than they would conducting business in a shop or on the phone. If they buy from you, they'll have to tell you their address and contact details. Often they'll answer optional survey questions at the same time.

If they don't buy from you, you might still be able to track which products they look at on the site and which adverts they respond to.

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Website visitors will often support simple surveys where they vote for one option from a list. With thought-provoking questions it can become an entertaining feature of the website. As part of the deal, you're expected to tell voters the results of the survey in return for their participation, so beware of competitors getting the inside track on anything valuable.

You can create more detailed online surveys to do more in-depth market research but you can't extend results from the website to the whole of your business. Many of your potential customers won't have access to the Internet or might choose not to visit your website, and these could be your most important customers.

For more accurate customer research, it's much cheaper to contact individual customers by e-mail than it is to write to them or phone them. Don't pester customers with follow-up e-mails, and keep the surveys concise. The greater the time commitment, the less likely it is that customers will take part.

The data you capture through online research can be rough, but it offers many companies their first chance to discover who their customers really are and what they care about.

Chapter 11 discusses measuring website performance and customer behaviour, and Chapter 10 considers the privacy implications.

## Enhancing print and radio advertising

With adverts in the phone book and the press, businesses can often only raise awareness that they exist. There isn't space to explain the business's values, or to reassure customers about who works at the firm. Customers are often expected to phone on the basis of a slogan and a company name. And many will be scared of aggressive salesmen or wary of revealing their address to strangers.

These customers might be prepared to investigate your business further, though, by visiting your website. And once they're there, you can reassure them about your business. This is particularly important where companies sell services to consumers (rather than selling to other businesses) and use advertising to reach them.

Here are some ideas for what the site could include.

### Company background

Tell readers who they're dealing with and where the company comes from. Tell them which markets you work in and what's important to your business.

### How to find us

Provide maps and photos to make it easy for customers to reach you.

### Testimonials

Let your success speak for itself. Use comments from previous customers to reassure your future customers. Don't depend on unsolicited praise: ask every customer what they thought of your service and whether they mind being quoted in your promotional materials.

### Contact us

Make it easy for customers to get in touch with you: accept letters, e-mails and phone calls. Offer to phone them back at a time that suits them. (See Chapter 8 for more on customer service by e-mail).

### Frequently Asked Questions list (FAQ)

This summarizes in question and answer format the company's business and what customers need to know. Use it to address some of the concerns that customers express when approaching you for the first time.

### Team news

A page introducing the team with brief profiles and photos helps to make the company approachable. If you have a company newspaper or customer newsletter, you can use a lot of this content on your website. Such publications often report on awards the company has won, staff changes, charity work the company has done, and photo quizzes ('which sales manager did this baby grow up to be?'). Any lighter material should be balanced with factual content so that people can see the company is serious too. Putting team news on the site can also help to win the team's support for the new website.

### Webcams

Video cameras can be set up to send images from your workplace to the website regularly (a so-called 'webcam'). Although office cameras can be dull, if you have machinery (e.g. printing press) or craftsmen (e.g. glass-blowing), your visitors might enjoy a real-time view. The best advert for a good entertainment venue (such as a bar or club) is a

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peek inside. You'll need to win the understanding of your team so that they don't feel they're being spied on. You can also use a webcam to provide a view out of the window if you're based somewhere that will interest your potential customers. Webcams also provide novelty value to a website that can make it more memorable for visitors.

## CASE STUDIES

### The wonders of webcam

Internet Florist arranges the delivery of flowers across the US and has a webcam showing its flower cooler. 'We wanted to use a webcam to demonstrate that we are a real florist,' says manager Michelle Schneider. 'We have been a family-owned florist for over 60 years and have the knowledge and experience to back us up.'

The website was launched in January 1996 and is at www.iflorist.com.



**Internet Florist uses its webcam to show that it's a real flower shop**

*Screenshot courtesy of Internet Florist Association*

San Francisco sushi restaurant Ace Wasabi's uses its webcam to show how its sushi is prepared. It sends a powerful signal that the venue has confidence in the quality of its food preparation. The website is at www.acewasabis.com.



**See the sushi being prepared before you book your table at Ace Wasabi's**

*Sreenshot courtesy of Americanese Inc*

## Increasing referrals

Once the sale is closed, some businesses see their job as over. But many see the opportunity to turn their customers into ambassadors, encouraging them to recommend the product. You can create communities on your site where customers can discuss the product and help each other out. You can also make it easy and fun for customers to recommend the site to their friends. People are more likely to recommend information of interest than particular companies, so see above for ideas on what makes attractive website content.

## Communities

People will be more loyal to other people than to any technology. If your site gives them the means to communicate, it will benefit from the through traffic when they return to chat. Potential customers will be drawn by the chance to meet like-minded people on your website and ask them what they think of your service.

Bulletin boards enable people to leave messages for everyone else to read and respond to previous entries. Chatroom visitors can exchange messages only with others who are on the site at the same time. There needs to be a lot of traffic on a site before a chatroom is practical, but specialist bulletin boards are a good way for people to help each other in an industry. With your visitors helping each other, your site develops a rich content base without you needing to research it. It works well where the product or service involves expert knowledge or where the product relates to an interest customers enjoy discussing. Use your customers' passion to convert other customers.

You can tell people what the bulletin board's policy is to deter obscene or inappropriate messages, but you still need to check regularly and delete anything off-topic. If the board strays too far from its intended use, your visitors won't be able to rely on it.

There is the risk that people will criticize your products and services on the bulletin board. You need to be confident that your product and customer service are right, but to pick up occasional glitches, you can invite product complaints at a separate e-mail address with the promise that they can be dealt with more promptly there.

## Referral mechanisms

Many websites include features to 'e-mail a friend this page', where readers can enter a friend's e-mail address and a personal message. The content of the page (or sometimes just a link to it) and the recommendation is then e-mailed by the website.
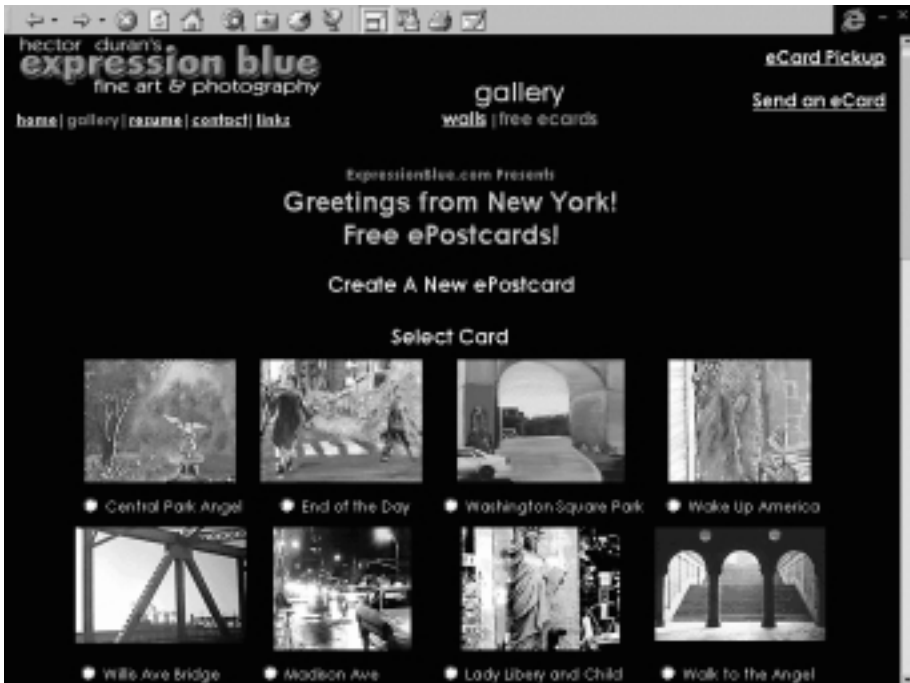
Electronic postcards give website visitors an entertaining way to keep in touch with friends – visitors choose a picture, add a message and enter their friend's e-mail address. The friend receives an e-mail inviting them on to your website to see the picture and read the message together. Electronic postcards bring well-targeted traffic to the site because people will choose images their friends like, and these will be related to your business.

**CASE STUDY**

### A work of art

Artist Hector Duran commissioned a website to promote his design work and is using electronic postcards featuring his illustrations. Visitors who like the pictures can send friends a cheery greeting, and those friends then come to the site to view the picture and hopefully look around the rest of the site.

The site can be seen at www.expressionblue.com and the programming behind the postcards can be licensed for free from www.mypostcards.com.



**Hector Duran's electronic postcards enable visitors to refer friends to the site**

*Art by Hector Duran; website design by Nina K DiMaio*

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## Increasing your profits

To be more profitable, you've got to either increase the money that comes into the business or reduce the money you spend. Your website can help you achieve both. Ways to attract new customers and cut the costs of customer acquisition are discussed above. Even if you don't attract any new business, your website can make you more profitable just by lowering costs.

The best thing about using the web to cut costs is that it usually coincides with better customer service. It's cheaper to update a website than a printed brochure and customers benefit too from being able to search for products automatically. It's easier to keep in touch by e-mail than it is by post, and the speed makes it possible to send timely information that customers could never expect of you before.

But this increase in profits needs to be balanced with the cost of creating the site in the first place. Make sure payback periods are realistic. Don't count on your technology lasting more than two years and plan for content to be updated much more often.

Remember that cost-cutting is guaranteed to increase profits only when the value of sales is unaffected. If you migrate your brochure online and refuse to print it, you're more likely to lose money because you'll deter customers who still prefer paper. Don't sacrifice your existing customer base in the hope of future profits. Use the revenue and loyalty they offer to give you leverage in expanding the company through its website.

## Developing brand loyalty

The greatest potential to grow a business often lies in increasing the loyalty of existing customers and getting them to buy more. Companies can be forgotten for the months in-between purchases, but building a website enables you to have a relationship with customers all that time. How much more effective would your business be if customers and potential customers were reminded about it every day?

### Portal/links page

When most people log on to the Internet they start at their ISP's portal or their favourite search engine. From there they can get the

latest news or start looking for what they need. But imagine if they came to you every time they went on to the Internet. What would entice them to do that?

Portal visits might be brief, but you have a chance to push your branding and company message every time your potential customer logs on to the Internet. Include links to bring people into the rest of your site and tease them with headlines to your news stories or special offers in the margins.

Although you're competing with the likes of Microsoft to be their portal of choice, you don't need to be as rich: you just need to create a portal that serves your customers' interests better than a generic gateway does and to persuade them to make it their browser's default homepage.

The trick is to create a web page with enough useful links and tools on it that members of your target audience will always want to start exploring the Internet from there. Don't be blinkered into thinking that only their activities related to your business are important. You must help them meet all their content needs, but that's not as difficult as it sounds. Most search engines are so keen to spread their influence across the Internet that they provide instructions on how to integrate their search engine with your website for free.

By linking to other websites you can provide all the information people need about how they use your product or service, without you having to do any of the work in resourcing it. If you create a good directory catering for your visitors' interests, they will come to your site first in future to do their research online. You can also obtain the latest news headlines to go on your portal (see below).

The sites you link to shouldn't be competitors but should be sites that offer information and products that complement your own. In many cases, you can also get them to link back to bring business to your site too. Think laterally to generate a wide range of links.

**2 Planning your website and creating the content**

**example**

► A company that makes tents is setting up a website to sell them directly. The site includes a directory of websites related to camping that customers might like, including:

- sites selling maps and guidebooks;

- online mapping and routing websites;

- bicycle shops;

- sites selling weatherproof clothing;

- sites selling mobile computers and mobile phones;

- weather information sites;

- countryside preservation websites;

- easy recipes (for round the campfire);

- websites offering folk music (for campside singalongs);

- holiday photo advice;

- sites selling camping holidays.

To save time researching links, visit www.dmoz.org. You're allowed to use this directory, or any part of it, on your website for free.

Consider offering free e-mail accounts to visitors, but only if you can offer a desirable domain name for the e-mail address to differentiate yourself. Free e-mail accounts are everywhere now and people who want one know where to go. There's little chance of them stumbling across your site in the search. It's more of an added bonus for regular visitors than a feature likely to attract visitors.

## Selling directly

Bus timetables, long-distance phone charges, the weather and your opening hours can all have a negative effect on your business. You can never know how many sales you're losing through near-random influences like this, but your website gives you a means to shatter many of the barriers customers face when buying from you by phone or in person. You can accept orders online and dispatch them by post to make sales, however remote your premises might be.

Sometimes competitors are able to use contracts or informal agreements to freeze you out of markets or make it difficult for your business to compete. If your competitors have a strong influence on your distribution channels, the Internet gives you a valuable chance to start again.

Even if you are a manufacturer and already have retail distribution, you can increase your margins by selling directly. Be careful that this doesn't turn your existing distribution chain against you, though. You'll be making competitors of your partners as you both try to sell the same products from the web.

If you're going to increase sales, make sure first that you can handle them. If you're already running at full capacity, extra orders will mean expanding the team or the machinery of your business, which might be too risky. You might also need to consider delivery for the first time and will need to resource this.

See Chapter 7 for more on selling from your website.

## Improving customer service

One criticism of supermarkets is that they don't offer the personalized service that good local stores do, where the grocer greets visitors by name and remembers what products they like.

But on the web you can personalize the service that customers receive and combine it with the economies of scale of mass marketing. Information can be published cheaply and web pages can be tailored to the customers' preferences automatically.

If you compete on service, you don't have to compete on price.

Here are some ideas for how your website might help you improve customer service.

### Personalized products

Now that the web is enabling customers to deliver orders in a structured form, products as diverse as clothing, books, toys and sandwiches can be tailored to the customer's wishes on demand. The line between consumers and producers is blurring, with customers choosing the components in their Dell computer, or auditioning

songs and arranging them for a customized CD. The factory machinery produces the product, but the customer tells it what to do and gets a result that better fits their needs.

### Customizing with Booktailer.com

Don't want to carry a bulky travel guide on holiday, padded with suggestions for places you'd hate to visit? Booktailor.com lets you pick and choose the content you want from different publishers and different destinations to make a travel book that fits your interests and your itinerary better.

Readers tell the website where they're going and when they're travelling and can then choose to include chapters from different publishers



**Booktailor's website enables customers to choose chapters from different travel publications which are then compiled into a customized holiday guide, which is printed and sent by post**

*Screenshot © Booktailor Ltd*

covering accommodation, culture, entertainments, shopping and history among others. The book can even include information on local events during the holiday. The chapters are automatically printed and compiled into a ring-bound book which is sent by post.

## Product recommendations

If Jean and Chas both buy the same product, it's a good bet that any other products Jean buys, Chas might also like. Sophisticated systems that automatically recommend products based on what else a customer has bought can be expensive, but you can easily keep track of which product types people like (e.g. rock music, pop music, blues) and when they last visited, and tell them what's new in their preferred section. You can even ask customers to describe themselves so that you can improve their experience at the site.

When applied to frequently purchased goods, recommendation systems also make it inconvenient for customers to switch allegiance. If your website remembers their last shopping list and they just have to add this week's new items and delete those they don't need to buy again, they can cut the time taken to minutes. If they go to another website, they have to teach that supplier all about their tastes and shopping behaviour.

Don't scare your customers by using data they don't know you're collecting. Respect their privacy and explain the benefits. They won't be impressed if you start telling them they need to buy toilet paper and they haven't allowed you to use this information. Give customers the chance to opt out of any data collection so that you don't lose customers who don't like the idea.

## After-sales care

Using your website, you can provide customers with any information they might need whenever they need it. There are no manuals for you to print (or for customers to lose) and the information is delivered cheaply and promptly.

If your product is technical (a washing machine, perhaps), you could provide detailed instructions in a range of languages, and segment them for the convenience of customers with different levels of experience. Furniture assembly brochures need to show exploded views, but imagine the impact of a 3D model on your website that the customer

2 Planning your website and creating the content

could rotate and magnify at all stages of assembly. Even if you are only retailing the product, you should take responsibility for your customer's satisfaction with it. It is your business that will be tarnished by a poor shopping experience, not just the manufacturer's.

## CASE STUDY

### Getting technical

RS Components (www.rs-components.com) uses its website to provide detailed technical information on the thousands of electronic components it supplies. Customers are spared the inconvenience of archiving technical data sheets on the kit they use, and have the convenience of the information being a click away when they need it.

Although manuals and telephone help are far from redundant (the Internet is not yet available everywhere), cutting the number of puzzled inquiries will usually cut costs and increase profits too.

### Faster turnaround for technical queries

You might be able to manage e-mailed queries more easily than phone calls. E-mails can be stored and answered in a batch, whereas telephones need to be staffed all the time. You can also get customers to complete online forms so that you can guide them in providing any data you need to be able to help them. See Chapter 8 for more on this.

### Secure communications

Many businesses have information on their clients that could be abused if it fell into the wrong hands. Using your website, you can provide a secure means for customers to send you computer files for the first time. Customers won't need any special encryption software, but the data will be scrambled if anyone intercepts it on its way through the Internet.

### Immediate product delivery

Newspapers and CDs are just wrapping for the words, pictures and music we want to buy. If your product is more about the information than the materials, perhaps it can be delivered online. Other examples include sewing patterns, maps, books, photographs, software and

paintings. All these can be sent as files over the Internet without the cost of physical manufacture and distribution and without the hassle of going to the shops or waiting for the post.

Admittedly, quality can be a problem with Internet delivery. People like to see the texture on paintings and might want their sewing patterns printed on paper too big or too flimsy for desktop printers to accommodate. Many customers don't have fast enough Internet access yet to fully unleash the potential for delivering some products. But some of these concerns will fade, and others will open opportunities to segment the market. Lower-quality digital versions of some products can be sold, with the original non-Internet product being available at a premium.

## CASE STUDY

### Move it with Bustamove.com
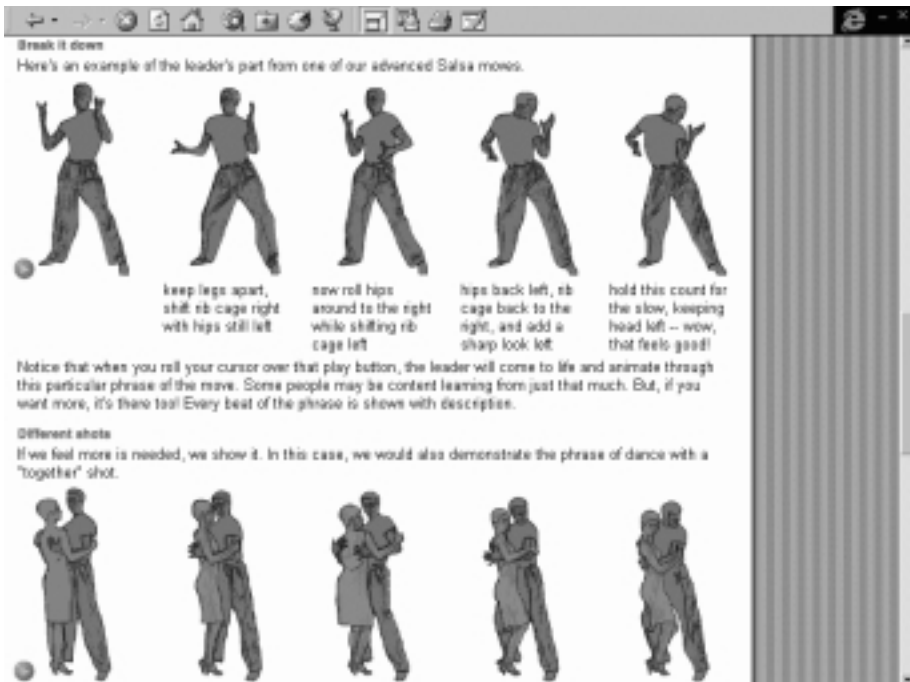


**Learn to dance by downloading lessons that combine animation with text from Bustamove's website**

*Screenshot courtesy of Bustamove Inc*

The web makes it easy for people to communicate with each other, exchanging text, pictures, sound and cartoons cheaply. This makes it an ideal channel for delivering some types of teaching that were delivered face-to-face before.

Bustamove.com was set up by Jeffrey Grossman and Kate Moschandreas to sell dance tuition over the web. Lessons include animated illustrations to show the moves and detailed explanations of the timing, stance and potential mistakes of each move.

### Round-the-clock service

Long after you've gone to bed your website is still working. Whenever customers are curious about your product range, or whichever time zone they are based in, your website will provide them with information on demand. And you can take credit card orders when customers feel like buying and don't have to rely on them returning when you're open.

### Search boxes

Customers can get information on demand – whatever they want, whenever they want it. Include a search facility on every page of your site if it has enough information to justify it. But make sure that it's sensibly indexed and the list of results is easy to understand.

### Offering accounts

Let customers open an account with you. They'll be spared the worry of sending their credit card details over the Internet for each purchase, and they'll be saved the time of giving you their address each time.

## Charting a strategy

To plot a strategy for your website, you'll need to pick and mix the ideas above. If you want to use the site to increase referrals from your existing customer base, for example, you'll need to give them a reason to visit the site in the first place and that might mean creating a portal or putting tutorials online. Wallpaper might attract visitors, but it's also a powerful memory-jogger for customers who download it.

You must be clear about how your website will help grow your company. Only then can you choose content that supports that aim.

# Planning your content

Once you know what content you need, you're ready to think about how it will be created. Some website features can be licensed for free, but your website designers might be more likely to recommend their own (and non-free) alternatives if you don't ask for free ones.

When writing the content for your website, you'll need to keep it snappy and put it in global context, as shown below.



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### Using syndicated content and free website enhancements

Minutes after they've happened, news of the latest world or industry events could be reaching your customers through your website. Your site could carry a box of the latest headlines which take visitors to the full story when clicked. It's free content you couldn't possibly resource yourself and you can pick and choose the publications you want to work with.

## CASE STUDY

### Harvesting the headlines

You can get free news feeds for your website from www.moreover.com. The company indexes news and information headlines from more than 1,800 sources all over the web and delivers them to websites as blocks of headlines dedicated to a particular industry or interest. There are 800

pre-selected categories, but websites can define their own keywords to have news delivered to order. By inserting a few lines of code into your website, you can have the current news harvested and pushed to your page.

Moreover.com offers this service to demonstrate its products for gathering business intelligence for companies that want to check what's being published about them, their competitors or their industry online. This screenshot shows how the headlines appear fully integrated with the host website.
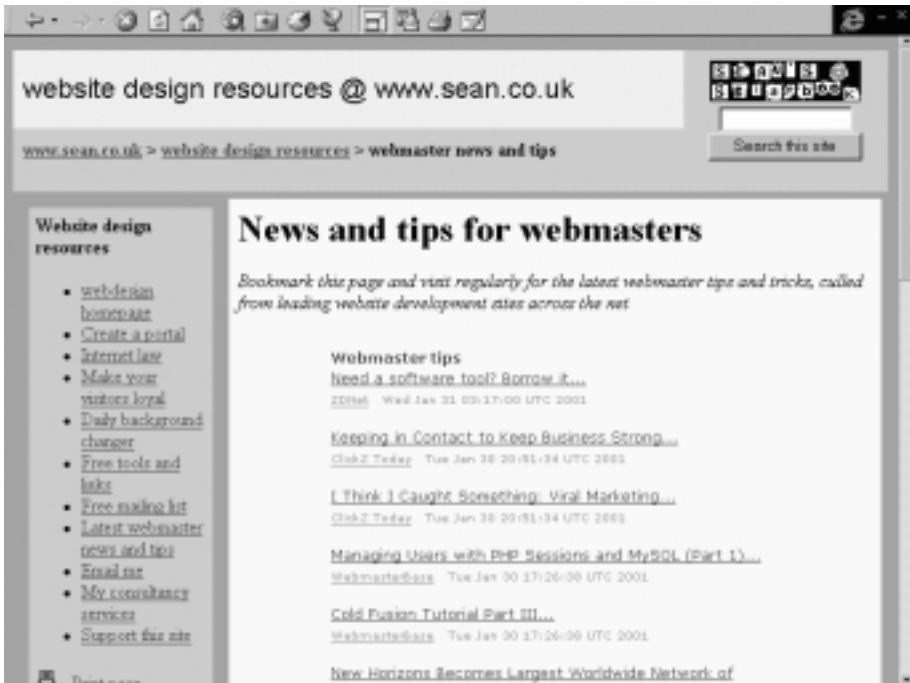


**Moreover provides free headline feeds which businesses can build into their website**

*Screenshot courtesy of Moreover*

Syndication is a good way to add extra content to a website, but it's not a good idea to depend on it for content that is essential to your site's success unless you have a watertight contractual arrangement to protect its availability.

Your site must build on free content and offer something exclusive as well, otherwise your visitors will cut you out and go straight to your source after you've introduced them.

There are a lot of free tools for maintaining postcards, polls, chat-rooms and bulletin boards. Some of these ask you to carry adverts on the page they give you in exchange for using the services. Often they let you rent an advert-free version.

There's no need to reinvent the wheel, but make sure that the tools you use are a good fit with your design. Ideally you want the colours to match your own site and for the page to carry your logo and navigation. It's essential that there's a clear link back to your website from any external pages you use. (See Chapter 5 for more guidance on site design.)

Beware of any risk transfer in the contract terms. Some of the usage contracts for free site services make you liable for the actions of your website visitors. If someone used your bulletin board to send a pirated music file, for example, you might find that the bulletin board provider could recover all their legal costs from you if the record company took them to court. If you can't find an alternative, it might be cheaper to have something custom written, rather than get it for 'free' and not be able to control the cost of dispute resolution. (See Chapter 10 for more legal tips.)

### How to write for the web

Screen space and reader attention spans are limited, so don't waffle. Many companies proudly stamp 'Established 1832' or something similar on their brochures and then go on to describe the company's birth. Be frank and ask yourself whether your customers care. You need to tell them what they do want to know straight away.

Good website content is customer-focused. Talk about the user benefits of your products, not features. Deliver information they'll like and don't make them wade through promotional puff. Use facts, not hype, to push products.

And write concisely. That doesn't mean you can't be creative, but you need to make sure that you don't repeat the same idea in different sentences and don't use more words than necessary. Some words can be deleted altogether, such as 'really', 'actually' and 'very'. You're

trying to communicate, not astound the audience with your vocabulary, so stick to short words that are easy to digest. Here are some waffly words to look out for, together with shorter alternatives:

a large number of – many

a large proportion of – much

accommodation – hotel/home

additional – more

adjacent to – next to

along with – with

ameliorate – improve

approximately – about

are able to – can

at this moment in time – now

behind schedule – late

come on stream – launch/start

demonstrate – show

donate – give

during the course of – during

endeavour – try

finalize – confirm

frequently – often

in order to – to

in short supply – scarce/rare

in spite of the fact that – despite

in view of the fact that – because

negotiations – talks

was a witness of – saw

in the vicinity of – near

remuneration – pay

utilize – use

Make sure that your writing is accurate. It doesn't have to follow the obscure rules of grammar (such as never ending a sentence with a

preposition), but it makes your website look amateur if it breaks basic rules or misspells words. Be careful with words such as 'there' ('their', 'they're') and 'here' ('hear') which have different spellings depending on the meaning. Be consistent in the formatting of dates and the choice of spelling where it's optional.

A wall of text is intimidating, so let it breathe with frequent paragraph breaks. Stick to one idea per paragraph.

The writing is one of the most important jobs on your website development, so make sure it's allocated to someone who writes accurately and clearly. Consider hiring a copywriter to write your content or to smarten up your articles.

Customers can rarely judge the quality of your goods or services by looking at your website, but they will notice how much care you've invested in your copy. If a company can't be bothered to check spellings, what are the chances it will offer great customer service?

### Checklist: writing for international readers

Now you're online, you're a global player. Don't confuse customers, and miss business, by writing ambiguously. Use this checklist.

■ Have you made it clear which towns, states or countries you can supply to? A pizza shop, for example, doesn't want to get an order they'll need to put a moped on a plane to deliver. And remember that city names aren't always unique, as these examples show:

Athens: Greece or USA?

Birmingham: UK or USA?

Brest: France or Former Soviet Republic?

Hastings: New Zealand or UK?

Saint John's: Antigua or Canada?

St. Petersburg: Russia or USA?

Toledo: Spain or USA?

Victoria: Australia or Canada?

Worcester: UK or USA?

Beware too of using words or phrases such as 'regional', 'local' or 'the country's best' which are irrelevant to global visitors.

**example**

► A fast-food outlet might use this message on its home page: 'We deliver in one hour to your home in Birmingham, Alabama, USA.' Visitors in the wrong Birmingham don't need to waste any more time on the site and Americans are reassured about the delivery terms and area.

■ Have you explained which currency your prices are in? Many countries (including the US, Canada, Australia and Hong Kong) use the dollar, so it's best to indicate the country as well as the currency. Explain that although you'll bill customers US$15, for example, their credit card company will convert it and charge them in their home currency. You can provide approximate rates for main foreign markets and link to online currency converters to help them out.

■ If you're going to offer translations, don't assume readers come from the most obvious country for that language. French is spoken widely throughout Africa and English is a popular second language for business. For that reason, it's better to use language names than flags or maps on navigation buttons.

■ Have you checked that dates are clear? In the US the date 5/11/07 would be read as 11 May 2007 but in Europe that same date means 5 November 2007.

■ Have you checked that any references to times include the time zone? You might be able to cut confusion by also making the website display the current time in your country.

**example**

► An online bookshop might say: 'Come back at 17:00 EST for a web chat with best-selling author Frank Madeupname (the time here is now 15:37 EST).'

■ If you're closing to celebrate Christmas, Thanksgiving, Chinese New Year or any other festival, have you made it clear on the site when this holiday is and when the business will be responding to e-mails again?

- Have you checked for seasonal references? While Europeans might hope to build snowmen in December, Australians will be on the beach. It's clearer to say a product launches in quarter three next year than say it's coming out 'next autumn'.

- Have you had any translations checked by native language speakers? Automatic translation software might be able to look up words, but it can't understand what you intended them to mean. You might want to link to an automatic translation website as a service to visitors, but make sure its limits are clear so you aren't blamed for its shortcomings. Automated services can't understand what words mean in context and provide at best a crib sheet for those who already know some of the foreign language. Visit this book's website at www.sbwtw.com to try one out.

- Have you checked that you're not localizing the website unnecessarily? It might seem helpful to include weather forecasts to help your local customers, but will it deter new foreign clients?

- Phone numbers, postal codes and addresses are formatted differently and are of a different length in different countries. Have you checked that any forms allow foreign visitors to enter their details in full, and don't assume there's a fault if their entries are longer or shorter than you might expect from your own country?

## Integrating your website with your business

When the competition comes from Internet start-ups that have secured millions in venture capital, it might look like they're in the strongest position. But they often don't have the premises or established customer relationships that you do. Bookshops are already focusing on the experience of shopping, letting customers read the books in comfort and setting up coffee shops. You could put a computer kiosk in your store or office, using your website's architecture. Your kiosk might help people sample your product or find similar products they like and then refer them to a shelf to pick one up, or offer to ship it direct from the website.

As Chapter 9 reveals, your team members will often have the best chance to promote your website, so involve them now. Ask them how

the website could make their jobs easier and improve the service customers receive.

## Summary

Although you can outsource much of your website's development, its strategic direction must come from within the company. There are many ways that a website can help your company to grow, but these will depend on your position in the marketplace and your industry. You'll need to have text, photos and interactive website features that support your aim.

Think beyond putting your brochure online. Good content attracts visitors and makes it easier to promote the website, but doesn't necessarily push products. It gives readers a reason to visit the site, giving you a chance to do business with them and fulfil your website's purpose.

Your content mix needs to be unique and well targeted at your audience's interests. That doesn't mean it has to be expensive – you can throw free content and cheap plug-ins into the mix and can often draw on your own or team members' expertise.

Everything on your website needs to be accurate and written for an international audience.

Your website's success depends on what it has to say and how it says it, so it's important that you articulate your goals to your website designers to make sure that they understand not just what you're putting on your website but what you want that to achieve. It will improve the relevance of their suggestions.