
How to Create a Website for Your Small Business

A Basic Guide for Presenting
Specialty Products and Services,
Photography, and Artwork,
on the Internet



Katherine Maxwell
Novato, California
www.skmaxwell.com
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Introduction

About This Guide

- Are you an independent contractor who would like to show your work to potential clients via a website but have no idea how to get started?
- Are you an artist or a photographer and wonder whether or not you should have a website displaying your artwork or photographs?
- Are you a one-person operation with a specialty product dissatisfied with your website that was designed, built, and is maintained by a marketing firm, but do not know what's involved in making a change?
- Are you a dog trainer who has some understanding and skill in building a website to advertise your services, but need to fill in the gaps with a bit of handholding?
- Are you a vacation-home owner who would like to have your own website to list this home as a rental?
- Are you a fly fisherman starting up a guide business who wants to understand what is involved in creating a website to promote your services?

If any of these sound familiar, then this guide will surely help you to understand how to create a website for your small business.

My job as technical associate in my husband's sole proprietorship business—Photograph America Newsletter, a photo travel newsletter for nature photographers—involves designing, re-designing, building, and maintaining our website and managing computer software with third-party products (as Volusion, Constant Contact, and FolioSnap). Along with this technical work, I take on three or four projects creating websites for individuals and small businesses.

After ten years of Web development in the corporate world and more than eight years in the independent sector, I have developed a way of working and a philosophy with the Web from these experiences. This guide reflects what I have found works and doesn't work.

Most importantly the website has to work, both for the individual or small business it promotes and for the clients and potential clients who come to it to find something they need. My experience has been that the latest technology does not necessarily offer the best solution. Often the simpler design and layout satisfy the customers' and owners' needs. I have come to realize that the small business owner is often intimidated or trapped by lack of knowledge of the technology, something that may be unavoidable.

Individuals can be mystified by the Internet and what they have to do, or think they have to do, to get a presence with a website. They can be held hostage by their lack of understanding and knowledge and by the technology. This guide is an attempt to help those of you who may be in such a situation. If you can identify with any of this, hopefully this guide will provide some good information, a beginning understanding of how websites are conceptualized, designed, generated, installed, and maintained. The more information that you have and understand, the less intimidated and more satisfied and successful you will be.

Business Decisions

Should you have a website?

Your first consideration is whether you should have a website or not. Before you go any further, you need to decide if the benefits of having a website outweigh the expense and effort. Look carefully at the PROs and CONs.

PROs

- Being on the Web is like having a listing in the Yellow Pages of the phone book or a business card. In today's world, the Internet is one of the first places most people go to look up someone or something, to find out who and what is available. The Web provides the added opportunity to display graphic images or photographs of what you are offering as a product or service.
- A website is an excellent format to conveniently show and spotlight your products, services, artwork, or photographs, particularly for people at a distance. Remember that it is the World Wide Web.
- The Web can be a convenient way of showing commissioned work in progress or developing design concepts conveniently.

CONs

- Setting up and creating a website involves time, expense, and expertise.
- Maintenance efforts are usually required once the website is up and running.
- A website is a passive presence, not enough in itself to bring you business. Think of it as a store in an obscure neighborhood with little foot traffic. You will need to get your name and your domain name (URL) out there so visitors will know to come look (search) for you.

What are the goals of your website?

A website is most effective when it satisfies your goals and your visitors' needs. Once you have determined that you want to create a website, you need to clearly identify the goals of your website and the needs of your visitors.

During the process of designing and developing your website, keep your goals that you have identified in mind. The goals of your website might be:

- To have a presence or an affiliation
- To promote and sell your photographs or artwork
- To provide contact information.

Each of your goals will affect how you design and develop your website. If the key goal is to sell a product or service, the website should facilitate the visitors' transactions.

What kind of a presence and presentation do you want?

The Web offers a variety of possibilities as to how you can present your products or services. Review such options as:

- Free Web hosting
 - may involve display ads or have restrictions
- Personal Web pages (no reserved domain name)
 - possibly a much longer URL
- Your own website
 - monthly costs and maintenance requirements
 - provides a specific, small brand identity
- Online galleries (for artwork or photography)
 - possibly limitations as to number of images
 - alliance with an association

Research the possibilities. Surf the Web and find out what is out there. In particular, look at websites that present similar products or services. Remember to keep your own goals in mind as you do this. Consider what would work for you and what would not work.

If you need to transact sales, what is the best way to handle this through the Internet?

To select a format for transacting sales, review the goals for your website and the costs and effort associated with all of the options. The more information you have, the better your decisions will be. Again, surf the Web to see how other websites transact business.

Some of the possibilities to consider are:

- Direct contact (information on email addresses or phone numbers)
- Online order form (submitted to you through email channel)
- Customized shopping cart (created by a technical contractor)
- Third party shopping cart (PayPal, Volusion, CCNow)

How can you facilitate visitors finding you?

A website on the Internet in itself is passive marketing and will not automatically generate or guarantee business. You will need to direct traffic to your website by including good keywords and page titles within your HTML code.

Services are available that will submit your site to search engines for a fee, but you can do this yourself. If you have title descriptions and good keywords in the META tags of your HTML code, Google will find you since it does a full-text search.

You should consider design decisions in relation to search engine capabilities. Displaying text as a graphic does not allow search engines to find your business name or description since there is no text. To be searchable, you need text, in the body or in the META tags of the web page. The text in graphic images is not searchable.

Make a list of descriptive keywords identifying your products, services, photography, or artwork. Include these keywords and descriptions, along with your business name, in the META tags of the HTML.

Technical Strategy

How do you register your website's domain name and set up an account with an ISP (Internet Service Provider)?

As soon as you have decided on a domain name (that is not already taken), register (reserve) the domain name (URL) so that you have it when you are ready to set up your website. Or register the domain name and set up an account for Web hosting at the same time with an ISP (Internet Service Provider).

For your own website, you will need to set up an account for Web space and hosting with an ISP. Some outfits that do this are:

- GoDaddy.com
- Sonic.net
- Earthlink.net
- Comcast.net
- SBCyahoo.com

I have worked with very small, local ISPs, somewhat larger, more-established providers, and a couple of the large, well-know providers. Your best bet is with an ISP that offers technical assistance and is accessible to you.

How do you prepare digital images (logos, photographs) for your website?

JPEG is the graphics format that is used to display images on the Web.

These are the steps to put photographs on your website pages:

1. Scan original photographs or artwork and save in JPEG format on your computer
OR
Download images from a digital camera to your computer
OR
Have slides or negatives converted to JPEG format by a service bureau and then load them into your computer.
2. Size and optimize the JPEG files for the Web
Set to 72 dpi or use “Save for Web” function
Full-sized images should be 450-600 pixels wide
(so there is no horizontal scrolling)
Thumbnails should be less than half that size
3. To size, optimize, and sharpen, use such software products as:
Adobe Photoshop
Adobe Photoshop Elements
JASC Paint Shop Pro.

What is the best way to build the pages for your website?

At this stage, you will lay out the website and generate HTML code, to create the pages for your website. To display your Web pages, computer instructions are sent to the browser on how to do this. These instructions are a computer language called HTML. HTML refers to Hypertext Markup Language and consists of a set of tags that tell Web browsers how to display text and graphics.

To build and maintain a website, you can:

- Hire a Web developer to do the work and maintain the site
- Hire a Web developer to do the initial site and then to teach you to take over the maintenance
- Learn how to use a Web authoring tool and do it yourself.

HTML can be coded directly into a text editor program or can be generated with a Web authoring tool, such as:

- Dreamweaver by Adobe (formerly Macromedia)
- FrontPage by Microsoft
- GoLive by Adobe.

How do you put your website pages on the Internet?

To transfer your HTML files and image files from your local computer to the server at your ISP, you will use software that uploads all your files. This process is called File Transfer Protocol (FTP) and is done using an FTP program, such as the following:

- FETCH for the Mac
from Fetch Softworks
shareware that can be purchased for a small fee
- WS_FTP for the PC
from Ipswitch
- FTP Explorer
from Microsoft.

What do you need to consider about your visitors' computers and software (operating systems, browsers)?

To provide ease of use for visitors to your website, you need to take into account the technical capabilities of their computers and hardware—the possibility of low bandwidth and different configurations. Think about how your visitors will see your Web pages and your graphic images on their computer. You do not want to exclude potential customers with older browsers, smaller screen size monitors, and dial-up connections.

- Dial-up modems are still a common type of connection.
- Plug-ins, as Flash or Quicktime, may not be installed or visitors may have older browsers that cannot handle the most recent technology.
- Monitor sizes are typically set to 800x600 pixels for viewing.
- The Web displays at 72 dpi (dots/pixels per inch) maximum (as different from 300-600 dpi on the printed page).

How will you keep your website current, accurate, and up-to-date?

For a professional and effective website, you need to maintain the pages of your website. Some administration of the website is necessary after it has been installed, particularly if your products or services change regularly. You may need to update content and images, add or change text and photos.

Some of the options that you have for maintenance are:

- Learn how to size and optimize images, add to HTML code, and FTP to the Web hosting server at your ISP.
- Contract with a web development service or technical individual to maintain your website at a monthly or as-needed fee.
- Set up your website with only contact information, so that no, or minimal, maintenance is required.
- If you link to other sites, check these links on a regular basis to be sure that they still work correctly or to find out if they need to be updated if they have changed.

Design Considerations

What is the order of importance of content from your visitor's perspective?

Outline the content for your website and set the order of importance of this content, looking at it from the point of view of your visitor.

- Feature your product, services, photography, or artwork up front and make the information easily accessible. Keep your website focused on the business at hand.
- Put content in order of importance from your visitor's point of view. You need to facilitate your visitors being able to get what they are looking for and to get what they need.
- Do not distract your visitors from getting the important information that they are interested in.

Consider such other content as:

- Owner's or Artist's Statement
- Biography or History of the Business
- Upcoming Specials or Events
- Contact Information

How will your visitor's computers affect your design?

Just as in your technical strategy, you need to allow for a variety of computers and technical levels in design considerations. Take into account what type or capacity computer and equipment your visitor has:

- Slower connections, as dial-up modem
- Older versions of Web browsers
- Screen viewing size set to 800x600 dpi

The design decisions you make should be thoughtful and should be weighed against such considerations as:

- Graphics above and beyond your necessary images add to the download time. A page filled with huge graphics and images can take a long time to download. A better strategy might be to present smaller images, as thumbnails initially, that can then go to larger views.
- Displaying text as graphics defeats the purpose of the Web—that is, linking:
 - Text in graphic images is not searchable
 - Graphic images add to the download.
- For a single, large image on a page, keep the size below 250k bytes, roughly 550 pixels square.

How do you make the look-and-feel of your presentation most effective?

Navigation

- Make navigation clear and understandable.
- Visitors should not have to go back to the home page to navigate to other areas of your website, but should be able to navigate to major portions of the site from any page.

Readability

- Make text more legible with greatest contrast (dark text on light background, light text on dark background).
- Use centering for headlines only (not blocks of text which are distracting and more difficult to read).
- Text should be no smaller than 10 points (Web size 2).
- Avoid ALL CAPS, which are harder to read, and considered shouting.

Web Effectiveness

- Avoid disturbing backgrounds, such as detailed wallpaper, blinking, scrolling, floating text.
- A black background exacerbates any design issues, particularly in regard to readability.
- Avoid flash pages and unimportant or extraneous information.

What elements in your design need to be consistent for a good layout?

Your website will be more effective with a consistent layout for all the following elements. Each page of the website should visually let the visitor know where they are and that they are in your site.

- Navigation bar.
- Font usage
- Color scheme
- Page layout
- Heading, titles, labels.

How will you keep your website professional looking and up-to-date?

- Test your website to make sure pages and links to pages work before you upload them to the ISP server and put them on the WWW.
- Double check spelling.
- Publish only completed material. If a page is “under construction,” leave it out until it is finished.

Top 10 Considerations for an Effective Website

- 1: Create a Home page that is concise, with no scrolling, and that communicates clear navigation and what the website does.
- 2: Present meaningful content in the visitor's order of importance, and only necessary and pertinent information.
- 3: Make navigation clear and understandable.
- 4: Layout content for scanning (not reading)—short, concise paragraphs and bullet points, not pages of text.
- 5: Have a consistent look-and-feel—navigation, graphics, color scheme.
- 6: Use only meaningful graphics and an appropriate amount of real estate.
- 7: Make text on your Web pages more legible, with greatest contrast ratio.
- 8: Make hypertext links keywords meaningful, and short and concise (a few words or short phrase).
- 9: Publish only completed material.
- 10: Test your website. Make certain that everything works.