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Good Web site gives business an advantage

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It is becoming evermore essential for small businesses to have a well-designed Web page in this modern world.

Tom Vaught, a partner at the Web design, development and marketing company Narrow Gate Media (narrowgatemedia.com), knows this.

"It is important to have a good Web site for several reasons," he said. "The main reason is so people can find your product or service. More and more frequently, people are researching on the Internet before they make any kind of large investment."

Jeb Banner, CEO of Small Box, a Web design and marketing company, (smallboxweb.com) also believes a good site is key. "A good Web site is a very powerful tool," said Banner. "Whether you are looking to better connect with existing customers or attract new ones, the Web is the best way to do it."

Vaught has seen first hand the impact that the Internet, or lack thereof, has had on modern businesses. "When the economy went downhill, the people who had a site invested in it to make it better," he explained. "The people that didn't have one, got one. Many of those who didn't get one have gone out of business."

However, both emphasized that simply being online is not enough – it is effectively connecting with people that is important. They recommend that all business owners ask themselves a few questions about their Web page: Is it easy to use? Can I find it when typing my product in a search engine? Is it easy to manage?

If the answer is no to any of those questions, it may be time to make changes. An uncomplicated site is vital, according to Vaught. "Simplicity is key," he said. "If it is easy to use and understand, then people will be able to effectively use it. If they are not able to find what they want quickly, they will move on."

Simplicity is not the only factor that makes a Web page easy to use. "User-friendly increasingly means mobile-device friendly," said Banner, of the Web design and marketing company. "People are not just using computers for the Internet anymore. They are using smart phones, iPads and other things like that. Having a site optimized for these devices is critical."

Often, being search-friendly can be more important than being user-friendly. "In many cases, people go online because they are interested in a product or service, not necessarily a particular company," noted Banner. "They are more likely to visit the sites that pop-up first when they search for that product or service."

In other words, the higher a company shows up on Google or Bing, the more hits it will get; and the more hits it gets, the more product it sells.

How does one make a site appear on a search engine? Fresh content, according to Vaught.

"Google uses an algorithm to decide who gets ranked higher," he explained. "Part of the equation is how frequently a page updates content. The fresher the content, the more relevant Google thinks it is, and the higher it will appear. Therefore it pays, literally, to have fresh content on your site."

Keywords are also, well … key. Search engines do not always know synonyms, so it makes sense to use the words most commonly associated with a business. For example, someone looking for a used car will likely type in "used car" when searching the Internet. While "pre-owned" may sound more exotic, a search engine may not find it as relevant.

In order to have a good site, and therefore connect with more people, both Banner and Vaught recommend that small business owners take a hands-on approach. "It's really no different than having a storefront," said Banner. "If you are not updating the product or the way you present it, people will walk out of the store without making a purchase. In the same way, if your Web site is presenting 'last year's product,' so to speak, it begins to look stale. A good owner invests time in a business' physical appearance. That same attention to detail also pays off digitally, whether it means having a site that owners update themselves, or owners closely coordinating with a Web company."

"What we've found is, when owners get involved, there is a higher success rate," Vaught said. "Owners have the best idea of what they want to show customers. Being involved with their page ensures they get their message across how they want."

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