

Is Your Website Working as Hard as You Are?

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So you've invested in your website and hired a design firm to produce that overdue design makeover. You've finally got a business website you can be proud of. You've shared the site with family, friends and clients. Everyone loves it.

What next?

Too often, business owners stop their web marketing here. They simply check "re-design website" off of their congested To-Do list, and move on to more pressing business matters. We frequently see our own clients fall into the same trap. The truth is, there is much more that can be done to optimize the return on your web design investment.

Here are three tips for increasing the value of your website:

1. Update your website, at least monthly.
2. Collect information from visitors, even if it's just their e-mail address.
3. Extend your website through eMarketing—from newsletters to special offers, keep your brand fresh in your visitors' minds.

A website is an active marketing tool. It should grow and change, and provide an interactive experience in a way that corresponds to your other active marketing activities.

Tip #1: Update your website, at least monthly. We've all had the experience of visiting a website that has a 'latest news' section. The most recent news item is from 2004. We know that the company is still in business, and has undoubtedly produced some news since then. However, this sends a subconscious message to visitors. If the company cannot follow through on the maintenance of their website, does it allow other details to fall through the cracks?

Often, there are several legitimate reasons to neglect website maintenance. Few small businesses have the resources to hire a full-time webmaster. Family members and friends who have web knowledge are often busy with their own lives and cannot provide the attention to this task that is required. When hiring a graphic design firm to create your website, ensure that web maintenance is addressed. Top Shelf Design, for instance, provides one hour of free web maintenance per month with the purchase of a web hosting plan (starting at \$20 per month).

Tip #2: Collect information from visitors, even if it's just their e-mail address. Most web hosting packages include access to some statistical information about "hits" on your website. Usually, however, this information lacks the specificity to provide true insight on the success of your marketing strategy. To overcome this problem, many websites now include a "contact us" form. Visitors complete basic information with the understanding that they will be contacted, usually by phone. Many web visitors are

turned-off by this method. While they may be interested in learning more about your services, a phone call may be too large of an initial step. Further, other types of visitors such as vendors, networking partners or related companies may not wish to enter your “sales” process.

Asking for visitors’ e-mail addresses is a compelling alternative. This information will not come for free—most visitors will gladly provide their e-mail address only with the promise of receiving a newsletter or special offers (see Tip #3). However, an e-mail list of individuals who provided their information voluntarily through your website is worth its weight in gold.

When asking for an e-mail address, make sure that you have the proper back-end infrastructure to support this campaign. Ensure that visitors are provided with an “auto-response” that thanks them for registering. Also, ensure that all messages sent to these subscribers include important legal wording and an “unsubscribe” feature. Top Shelf Design offers an affordable software package to accomplish these goals (starting at \$10 per month).

Tip #3: Extend your website through eMarketing. Now that you are developing a subscriber list, stay fresh in your visitors’ minds through well-designed e-mail messages. These can range in format from simple notices about an event or sale to an elaborate newsletter. It is important to send these messages on a regular (but not *too* regular) basis. The same themes about updating your website apply to keeping your eMarketing campaign up to date.

Regular contact with your visitors through eMarketing can produce amazing results. Depending on the services or products that your company provides, a one-time visitor is likely unprepared to become an instant customer. However, a gentle reminder two months later might find her at just the right time. Referral partners might also be reminded of you at precisely the right time, leading indirectly to a sale.

Investing time and a (surprisingly small) amount of money in these three areas will ensure that your website is an active participant in your marketing efforts. For a free consultation regarding your website marketing plan, contact Top Shelf Design at (202) 667-1966 or visit their site at www.topshelfdesign.net. To learn more about Top Shelf Design’s comprehensive eMarketing suite, visit www.topshelfdesign.net/emarketing.

Top Shelf Design is a graphic design and marketing firm located in Washington, DC. They offer both web and print design. A member of CHAMPS, Top Shelf Design serves a number of Capitol Hill clients.