

Beyond the basic web-site: Perils and Pitfalls

In the last article, I asked: “Why do you need a web site?”. This time, I’m asking: “If you start one, can you afford to keep it running?” Most people understand the two basic ongoing costs, domain registration and hosting, and probably have a vague idea that paying someone to design and create the thing may cost a penny or two. However, in my experience, what comes as a shock to many is the time and effort that needs to be expended to maintain web site content after it’s up.

If your site is intended to stop at providing basic information to your clients, then not too much needs to be done. If you move, change a phone number or your opening hours, then update the relevant page and that’s it. If you go a bit further and keep the specifications of your products, then depending on the volatility of your line, you will have some extra regular maintenance to do. However, this category of sites is manageable, and suits many small businesses, clubs and non-profits. Just don’t have a page that says “Current Events” filled with ancient offerings!

Are you looking to create some advertising revenue as well? The good news is that you *can* set it up and watch the income trickle in. The bad news is that if you want to *maximise* that flow, you need to attend to many more details. However, bringing customers to your site tends to increase advertising revenue, so looking after your own good will typically do the job, so long as the advertising doesn’t get in the way of letting your clients buy from you.

Supporting Sales needs a bit more work. Typically, you will need to keep up with changes in prices, new models, shipping costs, taxes and a host of other details if you want to provide all of the data a potential customer demands before they are willing to commit to a purchase from you. At this level, the technology is not a do-it-yourself proposition, although so long as the basic structure doesn’t change, non-professionals can probably do the updates. You will need to take a long hard look at the data you commit to maintaining, though. A photo, or even a photo gallery of each product really helps a potential buyer, but consider the time it takes to set up the product in good lighting, take studio-quality shots including close-ups of details, and edit and crop everything in an attractive and

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consistent manner. Now multiply this effort by the number of new items you want to feature each year. Even using plain text, how long does it take to describe something accurately and in a manner that attracts customers?

Now suppose you want to actually sell from your site. If there is a problem, you need it fixed yesterday. You need someone to keep track of the traffic on your site, and manage service levels so each customer has a good experience, not an agonizing wait and abandonment. If your service really takes off, are you prepared to add the necessary capital investment to keep up with the business, and do you have the staff to do it? Outsourcing technology expertise is probably the way to go; just make sure *they* have the capacity to keep up with your growth!

Obviously, I'm just touching on a number of issues in this article, but I trust I've made the point that a "make it and leave it" website will bring results at a basic level. It's still worth having for a large number of people, but at the point where you ask if the web site is pulling its weight, that's when some heavy thinking is needed—is your business willing to put in what's needed to go to the next level?

You may have noticed that I haven't even touched on Marketing. Suffice it to say that in marketing a web site, Content is King. You'd better believe that maintaining good content doesn't come cheaply!