There are very few companies that can afford not to maintain an effective web presence, even the goliaths that could survive without the added custom usually have some form of web service available. Maintaining a website doesn't need to be hard work and can provide your customers with the added value that generates sales. Many users; business and private, now use search engines such as Google to locate companies offering a service they require. If you don't have a website and your competitors do, you stand to lose countless customers.

So what exactly do we mean by an *effective web presence?* Unfortunately, simply having a website is often not enough. Your website needs to be tailored towards the expectations of your prospective customers. It should be simple to use, whilst fulfilling all the functions that your customers expect. You need to make a good impression, so it's very important that the site does not act as an eye-sore, this can be harder than it sounds! Whether you decide to develop your new site in-house or through a contractor, there are a number of details that you need to examine first.

Functionality

What would your customers expect to do whilst on your site? At the very least you should provide contact details for the business; if you expect customers to look elsewhere to find this information, they will simply go to one of your competitors. You could either provide an e-mail address and telephone number, or you could include a form on your website so that customers can contact you directly. When combined with a '*Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart (CAPTCHA)*' you can easily protect your inbox from an increase in unsolicited mail (spam). Most users are completely au fait with CAPTCHAs as they are regularly used when accessing forums or signing up for services. However, if you do opt to utilise a CAPTCHA ensure that the chosen solution supports accessibility options (for example automated reading of the CAPTCHA for the blind).

Allowing customers to contact you in this manner is essential for driving trade; it allows them to submit queries about your services even outside working hours. Depending on your target demographic, this could even be when most of your potential customers are browsing.

Additional functionality will largely be dependant on your area of business, you need to assess the balance between maintenance costs and customer satisfaction. For example if you run a restaurant, you may wish to consider designing a page containing your menu. But if you regularly change your specials, you may believe that the cost of updating this information is too high. You could either opt to exclude this information (preferring costs over customer satisfaction), absorb the cost and update the site regularly (preferring customer satisfaction over cost), or you could specify in the design documentation that you need to be able to easily update this information yourself (compromise.)

Only you can say which option would be best for your business, however if possible a compromise is usually the best route. This may increase the initial outlay, but could lead to an increased customer satisfaction rate without having to absorb the costs of regular updates by a third party.

Depending on the services you offer, you may be in a position to accept orders directly from the website. This is quite simple to set up, and a number of large businesses have taken the additional step of accepting payment via payment processors such as Paypal and Google Checkout. This allows the customer to order from your site without having to pass you their credit card details. Depending on the type of service you offer, it also offers both seller and buyer a certain level of payment protection. You could also accept card payments directly through the website for those users who do not wish to a the payment processor.

If you are not in a position to sell products/services directly through the website, think about other value added benefits. Are you able to provide a form so that a customer can request a quote? This quotation could then be generated and e-mailed back by one of your employees in the next working day, you may even be able to automate a quotation system. This kind of functionality allows customers to interact with your business, all you need to do is to sell the product!

Many companies also try and build a relationship with the customer by providing additional information. A commonly used tactic is to provide a history of the business, not only does it provide a personal touch, but it serves to keep the user on your page for a longer period. Every minute that they spend focused on your site is essentially free advertising! Combine this with the ability to order products directly from your website and your customer turnover could increase dramatically.

There is no right or wrong answer, a design suited to one business almost certainly won't fit another. In order to help ascertain your requirements take a look at competitors websites (if they have them) taking note of the functionality that they offer, but don't descend into some form of functionality based feud. You need to acheive a balance between functionality and design.

Designing your site

So you know what you want your site to do, but how is it going to look? Do you want the site to have a cold corporate image, or to feel more like a warm family business? This choice will ultimately depend on your target demographic. If you are trying to attract business to business custom, a corporate feel is far better suited. If you are trying to attract individual customers, then a warm feel may be better suited. The latter also depends on your product, it'd be a strange experience to visit a 'family friendly' site selling home servers! Some businesses go so far as to run two sites, one corporate and one aimed at home users. You can then provide the corporate address with quotes for other businesses whilst advertising the other site to home users.

The aethetics of your site will be largely dependant on the choice that you made above, but in either case you must keep it simple. An eye-catching image just below your company logo usually provides a smart look, but try to limit yourself to this. If you make the design of the pages too eye-catching, you will simply be drawing your customers away from the thing that matters, the content! Whilst it is important that the site is presentable, many users will find your site via a search engine not word of mouth. Search engines are only interested in content, something that becomes even more important when actually implementing the site.

From a cost perspective, bandwidth costs money, so every image that you display un-necessarily to a user depletes your resources a little. You do not want to receive ten thousands hits a month if those visitors simply admire your graphics and then leave.

Unless you are planning to publish articles, you should ensure that you avoid long passages of text. Customers will lose interest and visit another site if you expect them to read too much. You need to convey the essential facts whilst keeping the text concise. Additional pages such as 'Company History' can contain a larger body of text, but minimise the essential reading that your customer needs to do.

If you do need to display a large amount of text, give careful consideration to your choice of colour scheme. Ensure that you use high contrast colours to prevent your customers from straining their eyes. Black on white is most commonly used, although pages are often easier to read with a pastel background. White on black can be very difficult to read, however it is still far better than the yellow text employed by some websites!

It is very important that you keep the customers attention for long enough to convert the original click into a sale. If you overcomplicate your navigation menu's your users will become frustrated and leave before they can ever become a customer. If you have a large number of pages that you want the customer to be able to visit quickly and easily, consider grouping them into several menu's. The grouping should be logical so that the customer does not need to read through each menu to find the page they want, most will go elsewhere instead. You may have a lot of content that you want to show the customer, but try to focus on the essentials.

In order to provide easy access to all areas of your site you could create a sitemap, this is a page containing links to every page on your site. This will allow customers to easily browse all your content, and will also make it easier for search engines to index your content.

If your site allows users to submit any form of content, whether it is a comment on an article or a request for a quote, you should consider the use of a CAPTCHA. These are freely available and are often very efficient in reducing the level of spam that you will receive. This in turn will reduce your maintenance costs as you will need to spend less time removing unwanted advertising from your site, or sifting genuine quote requests from advertisements.

The most important thing to do is to focus on real content and avoid gimmicks as far as possible. Although the Design phase is technically complete, you will find that there continue to be design related considerations during implementation.

Implementing your site

You've completed the design of your site, and now have an idea of exactly what your business needs. Even if you plan to contract a third party to implement the site, it is important to understand certain aspects of the implementation process. Understanding the work that needs doing can help avoid a number of common pitfalls, which in turn protects the interests of your business. The full implementation process falls outside the scope of this article, but we will examine the few points that you need to assess. Regardless of whether you are using a contractor or developing in-house you should insist on the following points;

Insist that your new website be completely HTML Compliant. This will ensure that all potential customers can view your content. Non-HTML websites are usually targetted at a particular browser (Internet Explorer 6 being the most common example), but fails to display properly in other browsers (in the case of IE6 the pages then fail to display in later versions of Internet Explorer.) Make it clear to the development team that the HTML compliance of the end product will be assessed using the tools supplied by www.w3.org. The latest version of HTML is HTML 5, although the standard is not quite complete. Which version of HTML the product conforms too is generally of little relevance, so long as it is 100% compliant all users should be able to view it.

The level of testing you require before the end product is released will also help ascertain whether the final product is actually HTML Compliant. As an absolute minimum you should insist that the product be tested in Mozilla Firefox, Opera, and the two latest versions of Internet Explorer (currently 7 and 8).

Avoid using technologies such as **Adobe Flash** or **Microsoft Silverlight** un-necessarily. These open your customers to security vulnerabilities, for example, Adobe's Flash has recently had a number of serious vulnerabilities discovered. Ask yourself as a customer, would you be willing to put your computer at risk in order to trade with a company? If there's a competitor who doesn't require you to do so, who are you going to do business with? Don't put your customers in that position, as they are likely to go elsewhere.

Some of these technologies are also often platform specific (you should completely refuse any product relying on ActiveX as it will exclude all users not using MS Windows) and waste your bandwidth. Equally seriously, use of such technologies will also affect your position in the search engine rankings. This happens because the search engine will simply see the (for example) Flash file, and won't be able to read any of your content. Some developers work around this by using a process known as 'cloaking', which involves displaying a flash based site to users, and a text based one to the search engines. As ideal as this may sound, if the search engines discover that your site is doing this, you will be removed from their listings completely until

the 'cloaking' is disabled. This could result in months of lost footfall to your site and will certainly slow your market penetration quite dramatically.
Adobe's Flash is very popular with many websites because it provides an easy way to make a website look very attractive. It is not however the only way to do so, and should be avoided if at all possible.

If you are told that your proposed design requires functionality that is server specific, ask which one. If possible avoid Microsofts IIS and utilise a multi-platform server such as Apache. This will help prevent vendor lock in, which allows some flexibility if the cost of licenses for your server's Operating System changes. Apache can run on Windows, Linux, Mac or a variety of Unixes, so if you decide that you cannot afford the license fee required to upgrade an ageing version of Windows, you maintain the flexibility to transfer to a different Operating System. There are quite a range of suitable webservers out there and a good developer should be able to help you choose which one best suits your needs.

You may be asked whether you want Dynamic or Static pages, the answer depends on what you want your site to do. Dynamic pages are generated every time they are requested, usually from information stored in a database. Static pages are generated at time of creation and remain the same unless you manually change them. Because of the processing involved, there is a slight cost overhead to having dynamic pages, but they are far more flexible if you wish to update certain aspects yourself (for example the specials mentioned in section 1) or if you intend to allow customers to submit content (comments on articles etc.) Many developers utilise Content Management Systems (CMS) such as Joomla as a framework for dynamic pages. This can often help reduce your development costs as well as provide the additional utility that one would expect from a dynamic page. Dynamic pages are often viewed as more flexible, largely because you can edit contents such as Navigation menus in the database instead of having to update each and every existing page.

You need to be aware that database based solutions can introduce an additional security risk, known as SQL Injection, if they are not implemented correctly. A good developer will know how to write your site in such a way as to mitigate these attacks. Be aware however, that many of the recent examples of 'hacking' involved SQL Injection. SQL Injection is a real world risk to your business and potentially to your customers data, so ensure that you hire high quality developers to create your website. Trying to save a little on the initial outlay could cost you very dearly in the future. It is difficult to overstate the benefits of hiring a developer who knows the importance of cleaning and restricting user supplied input.

As you can see the Implementation phase does contain a few potential pitfalls, however these can be mitigated by specifying exactly what you do (or don't) want done. Consider using Dynamic pages if you wish to allow customers to submit comments on articles. This type of feedback is quickly becoming the norm and is often referred to as 'Web 2.0'. Even if your customers will be corporate entities, the ease with which you can manage and update your site is highly beneficial. With many CMS' you can enter your text as if you were creating a Word document, and the software will generate all the HTML coding for you!

Monetising your investment

There are ways you can help ensure that you recoup at least some of the investment you have made in your company website. In order to acheive this, it is essential to drive customers to your website. If your business exists in a niche market then search engine results may be enough, but if you exist within a competitive market you could consider an advertising campaign. Most search engines will allow you to buy adverts that will appear alongside the standard results. The cost of these varies between each search engine, but most allow you to set a budget.
Advertise your new site at every available opportunity, add the new web address to letter headers and e-mail signatures as well as any existing advertising. If you are selling products or services through the website, you could even consider a special offer to celebrate the launch of your new website.

Once you have driven customers to your site, there are a number of ways to monetise them, the most obvious being to sell your product! You could also consider displaying advertisements through an Ad Broker such as Google. If a customer clicks an ad you will receive a small amount of the revenue that the broker earns, many brokers will also allow you to block adverts from your competitors. Be aware that some users disable adverts from displaying in their browsers, so it remains important that your website continues to entice the user to purchase your product. Do not allow your business to be put in the position of having a site more tailored to serving ads than fulfilling it's original design intentions.
You should also be aware that some internet users are strongly opposed to advertising, these users are likely to refuse to use your site if it displays any advertising. What proportion of your target market consists of this hard core will obviously depend on your product. Clearly the decision to display outside advertising requires far more consideration that you might at first assume.

Conclusion

Whether you simply provide a list of available services, or a fully automated ordering system, there is no right or wrong path to take. So long as you match your site to the needs of your business you will be achieving the most important aim, letting customers know that your business is there! There are ways to recoup the investment without necessarily providing a service, but these should not be relied on. Ensure that your customer enjoys their visit to your website and they are more likely to return again, don't alienate your customers through an over reliance on outside advertising.

As with any business decision, it is very important that you continuously review the decisions you have made to see if you can push further sales. Hopefully this should only involve minor tweaks to your website strategy, and will carry minimal cost.

Remember that once your site is online, the whole world can discover your business, so strongly consider any material that you publish and decide in advance whether you wish to accept international orders. To avoid frustrating customers be very clear about your chosen policy on the site.

Your Investment will have been in vain if users cannot find your website, so promote your new portak at every reasonable opportunity. Whether it be via a targetted advertising campaign, a web exclusive promotion to celebrate the launch, or simple

adding your web address to printed material. You can also request addition to search engines, although they will generally find you once people begin linking to your site.

Above all else, avoid alienating your users! Over use of advertisements, un-necessary use of Flash or Javascript or flooding forums with links to your sites are all good reasons for customers to shop elsewhere. You will never be able to please everyone, but if you can avoid the major pitfalls you should be ready to target the majority of your chosen market.

If you have found this article complicated, you may wish to contract a consultant to help you design and build your site. This will allow you to focus on how you want the site to look, and what it should do. If you feel confident following the points explored, then it will help reduce the initial outlay. So long as you ensure the points raised in this article are adhered to, your new website will represent a solid investment in your companies future.

About the Author

Ben Tasker is an IT Manager & Linux Specialist at Virya Technologies. He has substantial experience within the IT Industry, and a keen interest in Network security.

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