Getting the Most Out of Your Website ©

In an increasingly wired world, businesses that want to be taken seriously need to be findable online, need to be credible online, and need to prove their value to potential customers online. Despite (and perhaps because of) the ever-increasing number of new channels, a website is still essential, both for making sales and establishing your professional credibility.

Even the simplest website needs to clearly communicate a business' benefits to potential customers. As a small business person, your time and money are both at a premium. **So it's essential you find an easy way to manage your site's content and control its functionality.** With so many options available, how do you get the most bang for your buck?

Your greatest power lies in communicating your message simply and directly. Becoming more findable, more credible, and more valuable online all require one thing only – that you provide a stock of meaning-full stories about your business *on your own site* that you add to consistently over time. This creates a virtuous cycle:

> Search engines "learn" what your business does with each new bit of content ... and reward your clear and regular communication by sending more and better-qualified searchers to your site ... who find more value and better-articulated reasons to choose you to meet their needs ... which gives you more happy-customer stories to tell online!

To add more "juice" to this happy cocktail, you should be sharing your stories through other channels (e.g., social media) that your best-fit potential customers use regularly, with links back to your site for more information: For now, put "learn how to create a Content Marketing Strategy" on your to-do list for later.

In the meantime, what best practices should you follow you as you get your website **content** online?

1. It must be **manageable**. Without the budget for your own marketing and IT staff, you need a website you can manage yourself with a minimal learning curve. You'll need to be organized, consistent, and responsive, of course, and to make sure you can afford the monthly hosting and any content development costs. It's easy to find a quality web hosting company who will "house" your site and provide backup and security for a low monthly fee. A good content management framework (more on this below) will help you accomplish 90% of the visual and content updates you'll ever need, and the good ones are as easy to learn as MS Office.

2. It must be **yours**. Why build someone else's brand with your content? Resist the temptation to make Facebook et. al. the primary home for your content. Those

channels are great for sharing snippets to encourage viewers to connect more deeply on your own website, where you hold all the keys and make all the decisions about the way your brand looks and acts, the company it keeps, and who can see what when. But if you don't have total, flexible control over all the content as well as your URL, IT'S NOT YOURS. This includes popular proprietary platforms that limit your access, flexibility, domain name options, content portability, etc.

3. It must be **engaging**. Different visitors to your site will have different preferences about what info they're looking for, how they prefer to be engaged, and what turns them on enough to buy from you. Serve your stories in ways that honor that diversity of preference. Testimonials, articles organized by category, videos, case studies – these are all great ways to provide a rich experience and enable a variety of choices through which your visitors can engage. Even the simplest website can deliver the personal benefits of choosing you in interesting, multi-customer-centric ways.

4. It must **compel action**. No matter how terrific your offer, most people won't be ready to buy after reading your "About Us" page. To help visitors feel valued, ask them to join your email list so you can provide them additional valuable content offsite (which will gently nudge them back to your site to reward their deeper connection). Ask them to take a survey so they know you appreciate their feedback. Ask them to register for a coupon so they know you respect their need to sample before making a full commitment. Ask them to like your Facebook page (which you built that AFTER you built your website, right?) and share your content so they can demonstrate their own resourcefulness in their social circles. Install a live chat app so you can answer their questions in real time. Every visitor should have something to do next that furthers the conversation and gives them incentive to say "yes." Keep them connected and build your relationship by providing value that will compel a sale.

Five years ago, honoring these four commitments (manageability, ownership, rich engagement, actionability) would have been a tall order. Not so today, with the rapid evolution and proliferation of several citizen-friendly content management frameworks, and their easy interconnectivity with the wider Web.

Which brings us to your site's **functionality**. The way your site is organized and how it "behaves" for you and your visitors, will also impact your findability, credibility, and value.

- Clearly organized navigation makes it easy for your visitors to understand the most important couple of things you want to communicate. Give your visitors a few, relevant choices in the main navigation, and relegate less important content (e.g., your "resources" list) to secondary links that aren't front and center.

- Be choiceful with added functions. Just because you *can* share events, post videos, or relay your cat's perspective on your blog, doesn't mean you should.

Use your site's power for relevance: The kitchen sink approach just makes you look exhausting to work with.

- Make sure your primary contact information is on every page, in the same place on every page. If your goal is to get people to pick up the phone and call you, make that phone number prominent!

- Measure visitor traffic and activity with a good analytics tool, so you can base future marketing decisions on real visitor behavior. The better your site meets visitors' needs to connect meaningfully with your brand, the more loyal and regular they will become.

- Test functions and links before the site goes live, whenever you update any module, when new browser updates are released, and spot check regularly, to make sure your site behaves as expected. Dead links, broken forms, and over-large photos that hog memory and increase page load times are the bane of your credibility.

- Build your site on a quality content management system. "Quality" means:
  - Allows you to change the site flexibly -- both design and content - without cost or with manageable cost
  - Allows you to incorporate different types of content (e.g., events, video, social media sharing, commerce (if that's relevant), contact forms, etc.)
  - Software gets upgraded by a reliable community of developers as the web itself evolves, and upgrades are easy for you or your web host to install.
  - If you don't have a compelling reason to use another content management system, take a good look at WordPress. It's awesome on so many levels.

It all comes back to being found, credible, and valuable. If relevant content works harmoniously with an engaging, clear, consistent user experience, then your website will be one of your most powerful business-building assets.