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HAVE REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

If it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is.

The businesses that benefit most from the internet are those that take the time to understand the strengths and weaknesses of this new medium.

When used effectively your web site can improve business processes, build stronger ties with your customers and reduce the cost of promotional and point of sale materials.

Before making the commitment to developing your web site you need to do a little research. See what other companies are doing online. Whether you are developing your own site or enlisting the assistance of a professional, you will need to be informed.

TWO



CHOOSE YOUR WEB SITE ADDRESS WISELY

A web address like `myisp.com.au/~qikphone` is not a good address for a business. The little squiggly line is called a tilde, and is common in web addresses designed for personal home pages.

These types of addresses are difficult to remember and many search engines give them a low priority, making them difficult for your potential customers to find.

Another problem with this type of address is that it is not portable, and will become unreachable if your ISP goes broke or your relationship with your service provider sours.

The solution to these problems is to register your own domain name. Your domain name should be short and have an obvious connection to your business name. For example, Qikphone Technologies might register the domain `qikphone.com` or `qikphonetechnologies.com`.

Like any other promotional material, your web site needs to reach your customers. Don't assume that because your site is online that it will be easy to find. With millions of pages already online and more added daily you will have to promote your site in order to reach your customers.



PLAN YOUR WEB SITE

Whether you choose to build your site yourself or enlist a professional web developer, you need to plan your site.

It is important that you consider how you want your site to work for you and what benefits a site will bring to your business. Your site can be used as a sales tool, to distribute information, for customer support or even for entertainment.

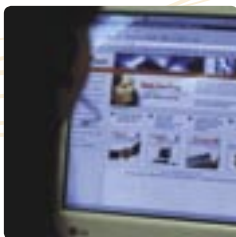
The next thing to consider is the appearance of your site. Take the time to see what other businesses are doing online. Make a list of web sites that you find appealing. This can give you a better idea of how you would like your site to look.

Gather as much information about your business as possible. Brochures, logos, letterhead, file photos, pictures of your products, etc. Then prioritise them in the order you think is most important.

Map out the pages of your site. A simple diagram may help you decide how to structure the navigation of your site. It will also help you find any problems before you start developing your site.

Know how much money you want to spend on your web site.

FOUR



MAKE SURE YOU CAN MAINTAIN YOUR SITE

Your site must be easy to maintain by you or your staff. Recent advances in web development software have made maintaining a web site as easy as using your word processor.

If you are enlisting a web developer, make sure that your site is built so you can edit it with standard HTML editing software like Microsoft FrontPage or Macromedia Dreamweaver.

You should get into the habit of updating the web site regularly to keep it fresh and relevant, and to maintain customer interest.

Not only will you ensure that you have an up-to-date web

site, you will also build the in-house skills to use the web as a business tool. This can give you a competitive advantage.



KNOW WHAT YOU OWN

If you are enlisting a web developer, from the outset, know what they own and what you own.

Some developers may claim copyright over the work they have developed for you or may use technology which they are not licensed to legally use.

A reputable developer will tell you up-front what technologies were used on your web site, who is responsible for licensing any additional technology and who owns the copyright on content, images, etc.

It is a good idea to ask for a CD with the entire web site on it when the web developer has finished the job. That way you can quickly mount the web site at an alternative location should the need ever arise.

SIX



KEEP YOUR SITE SIMPLE

When working out what you want on your web site, consider presenting the information in layers. You need to allow your customers to navigate your site quickly while making the information easy to access.

Lay out the content on your web site so users can explore it. Potential customers interested in specific aspects of your products or services should be able to easily find out more about the topic that they are interested in.

Web space is inexpensive, so you can afford to make volumes of information available to your customers. However it is absolutely critical to make sure you

structure this information so that visitors to your web site can find what they are looking for quickly and easily.

When your customers are browsing your web site, let them decide how far into your web site they are going to dig.



MAKE YOUR WEB SITE PART OF YOUR SALES PROCESS

If you speak to a customer on the phone, remember to ask them to visit your web site.

If your web site includes images of your products, testimonial letters from your customers or samples of your work, it has the potential to be a much more powerful selling tool than a fax. This is because your site can be much more than a static page. You can include sounds, animations and even small movies.

It is a good idea to offer your customers both a mailed brochure and your web site address. Make sure that all your marketing material contains your web address, and provide the addresses

of specific pages to let your customers access the pages relating to particular products quickly and easily.

Make all your marketing material work for you by treating your web site as an integral component of your marketing strategy.

EIGHT



DON'T TREAT YOUR SITE AS A ONCE-OFF PROJECT

Building a web site for your business is a process rather than a project with a fixed start and end date.

To be successful, your web site should be regularly updated and it should evolve to incorporate new features and pages. This process should never stop or you risk creating a stale, dated web site that your customers lose interest in.

Make sure that your staff understand this concept and how they fit into the process. Encourage them to develop the skills necessary to make updates themselves and to suggest new features and pages.

Keep looking around at what your competitors are doing and think of new ways to improve your business processes by using your web site in innovative ways.



A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

Graphics are a major part of any web site. They may be functional or may simply be used to make your page look more appealing. Images take longer to load than text, so you need to use them wisely. Make sure that users who are not interested don't have to wait for large images to load.

You can layer your images the same way as your text. For example, if you have a series of product pictures, load these as small thumbnails (maybe the size of postage stamps). Label the images to ensure customers know they can click on them to view larger images.

You can go further by offering your customers

different views of your products, animations or even movies.

This kind of layered effect allows your customers almost the same ability to scrutinise your products as they would have if they walked into your shop and picked them up.



KNOW YOUR CUSTOMERS

Most retailers keep track of how many customers visit their store. You should know the same thing about your web site.

Make sure that the service provider hosting your web site can provide you with detailed reports that you can view at any time. These reports should show where your online customers come from, what page they first viewed, which search engine they used, how long they stayed on each page, and from what page they left your web site.

This information can tell you whether your web pages are providing users with the information they are looking

for or if the navigation structure of your site is clear and easy to use.

The information may also provide you with clues as to where on your web site you might prompt users to email you for more information. This could mean the difference between making a sale and losing a potential customer to a competitor who provides more information.



USE YOUR WEB SITE AS AN OFFICE TOOL

One of the most difficult aspects of running a business is to communicate its objectives clearly to staff.

Larger businesses typically use an intranet to accomplish part of this goal. An intranet is a web site that usually cannot be accessed from outside the business. It contains information such as telephone directories, annual leave data and application forms, entire QA systems, staff manuals, product manuals and price lists.

The benefit of an intranet is that no expensive paper manuals need to be produced and content can be updated in seconds. Paper documents can take days or

weeks to be updated and even longer to distribute.

Using your intranet effectively can save you money as well as act as an incentive for your staff to acquire the skills to use the internet effectively. Well trained staff may help you gain the edge on your competitors when it comes to online strategies.

TWELVE



RECOGNISE THE FULL POTENTIAL OF EMAIL

Email is the most widely used internet application. It is fast, cheap, personal and convenient for you and your customers to use.

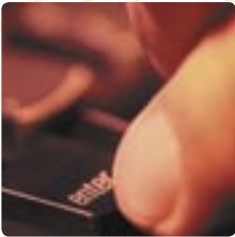
Allow your customers to send you email messages from your web site and make sure that these emails are answered promptly.

Allow your customers to subscribe to email newsletters about your products and services. This helps you build valuable email marketing lists.

Use email to build and maintain relationships by sending personal emails to people to thank them for their inquiries, to

acknowledge birthdays and anniversaries, or just to say hello.

Unlike a phone call, email allows recipients to decide on when and how they will respond. Just make sure you check email regularly and reply promptly.



DON'T PROMOTE OTHER COMPANIES IN YOUR EMAIL

Even though thousands of businesses have a registered domain name for their web site, many businesses still use an email address that promotes their internet service provider (ISP).

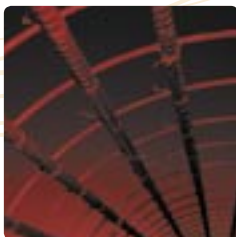
Having your own domain name will allow you to have your own email address. If you don't have your own domain name, your email address may be something like `qikphone@myisp.com.au`. This promotes your ISP and tells your customers that you are not serious about providing online services.

If you have your own domain name, your email address might be `sales@qikphone.com`. You

could also have additional email addresses for your staff and each function of the business.

Having individual email addresses projects a more professional image and allows you to direct the email inquiry according to the expertise and specialisation of your staff.

Remind your staff that it is important to respond to client emails promptly and with courtesy, as all client emails are potential sales.



RECORD THE EMAIL ADDRESSES OF YOUR CUSTOMERS

Start to build a database of email addresses from day one. You can do this by offering email newsletter subscriptions, collecting business cards in your store or offering special promotions on your web site.

A database of customer email addresses is a valuable marketing tool that allows you to quickly transmit information to a large number of customers at very little cost.

You can provide your customers with incentives or promotions to get them to register their email addresses. For example, you can offer to notify members of your mailing lists with special

deals, events or even offer discounts.

Once you have built up an email marketing list, protect it as valuable business information. Store it in a secure location. Do not allow unauthorised use of the mailing lists and never sell it to a third party.



CHECK YOUR EMAIL FREQUENTLY

Check your email regularly. If the telephone rings, it is answered promptly because everyone knows it might be a sales inquiry. Email should be treated the same way, as each message represents a potential sale.

You should let your staff know that prompt and courteous replies to email inquiries are important to the success of the business. Remember, email is no different from any other business correspondence. Responding quickly with the right information could close a sale.

Ensure that email is not left unanswered due to staff turnover. To avoid this, make

sure that all email is sent to your business addresses, not to personal email addresses belonging to your staff.

As your use of email grows, you should consider developing and implementing an email policy that clearly outlines how email is to be used. This will allow you to use your email system to its potential and minimise abuse of this mission critical business tool.

BE CAREFUL OF THE "TO" LINE

If you want to send an email to more than one of your customers at a time, NEVER use the "TO" field in your email program. If you do, all the email addresses are visible to all recipients and can be copied or sent to your competitors. Even worse, a recipient can reply to all these email addresses with an inappropriate message.

Instead, when sending mass emails, always use the "BCC" or "blind carbon copy" field. The email will still go to all recipients, but the addresses will be invisible. This way your email lists are secure.

Alternatively, you could use a mailing list facility. This works by naming the mailing

list, adding as many email addresses as you wish and then sending only to the mailing list. A mailing list can be secured by making it impossible for anyone but an administrator with the right password to reply to the mailing list.

Another way to hide email addresses is to use the mail merge feature in programs like Microsoft Word or Corel WordPerfect.

Remember that your email mailing lists are valuable marketing collateral and should be protected from misuse.



KNOW THE FEATURES OF YOUR WEB HOSTING PROVIDER

Some web developers will try to persuade you that adding new features to your web site, such as online shopping facilities or chat boards, requires expensive coding.

In many cases this is not true because such systems already exist and can be readily plugged into existing web sites.

For a fraction of the cost of developing such components yourself, you can “rent” the right to use them. Any technically proficient web service provider should be able to advise you on products compatible with their systems.

Think of your web site as a modular structure. You

should be able to expand your site if necessary by simply plugging in an extra component. This way you will never be left owning expensive, out-of-date technology. You can simply swap one component for another.

TIP



CHOOSE YOUR WEB HOSTING PROVIDER WISELY

When choosing the company that will host your web site and business email there are a number of factors to consider.

Do they offer value for money?

Are they using the latest technology, and is it compatible with popular office software?

Do they have adequate security to protect your data?

Do they have high bandwidth so customers can download your pages quickly?

Do they have backup bandwidth in case a link goes down?

Do they have power backup in case the mains power is interrupted?

Do they have climate control for their servers to prevent server failures?

Do they have 24 hour Technical Support to assist you when you need it?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, you may want to reconsider your choice. Remember that price is not the only consideration when choosing a web hosting provider.



The WebCentral Guarantee means that we offer leading and innovative technology, deliver world-class service levels, and will be responsive to your needs at all times.



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17 MISTAKES BUSINESSES MAKE ON THE INTERNET

Common mistakes made by businesses on the internet

