

## TECH HOUSTON



# Business Development Technology

## Company's Web site is only the first step of a Web business plan

The two biggest misconceptions about Web sites are: "I have been doing okay without a Web site" and "I probably cannot afford one."

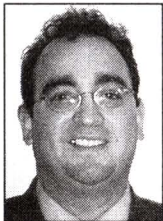
Every business should have a Web site. A business can have one for as little as \$50 a year, or less than \$6 a month. Like everything else, however, "You get what you pay for."

A Web business plan involves:

- **A Web site with a wealth of information.** Every service the business provides should be described in detail, but a business needs to have a balance between giving its potential clients plenty of information and giving its competitors a blueprint of the business.

Testimonials are always a plus, providing credibility. A specialized business could explain its service better with a couple of specific client scenarios. Key is selecting a testimonial that highlights the biggest selling features, such as great prices and fast service.

Web site text takes time to develop. It must be well prepared and planned. It also should be easy to use. Flashy sites only work for a narrow margin of businesses.



### WEB BUSINESS

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A Web site also should look professional. People are cautious about obtaining a service or product from a site that gives any reason to doubt its authenticity.

- **Contact direction.** No respectable business should have an e-mail account that ends in "aol," "hotmail," or "yahoo." Customized e-mail accounts start at only \$9 per year.

Additionally, a personalized e-mail account tells the recipient where to find the sender's Web site address every time an e-mail is sent. There is no better way to lose credibility than to send an e-mail from an outside source. And every page on the Web site should have a phone number and e-mail address.

E-mails should be forwarded to the sales staff as soon as possible. There is nothing like a first impression. An e-mail reply or call within minutes of the initial request does more to increase credibility than anything else can.

- **Sales processes.** Businesses that have products that can be sold online can have a fully functioning "shop cart" for about \$40 a month. These shop carts can even estimate and charge for shipping and handling.

A Web site should have a "contact us" page that gathers the client's information. The best way to get visitors to give up their information is to give them something in return — something that can help the sales process; for example, a free issue of a publication, a newsletter, a

pen, a free report or even one month of free service.

- **Special applications.** Businesses can benefit from special programs that will improve their processes and help them reduce clerical work. For example, a staffing agency may need a form on which applicants are required to enter resumé information in each field.

The savings achieved by this program can equal its development costs in a few months, but custom development for Web sites is expensive and should be done cautiously. Instead of spending thousands of dollars to develop a customized program, a business often can find Web applications for sale that will serve their needs for a much lower price.

An insurance agency might be able to buy a Web site specifically designed for its field instead of having one developed from scratch. The developmental cost of a Web site with similar functions will be much higher if developed from scratch. It's important to think about return on investment when using the Web to help determine if the process is cost effective. How long until the investment will pay for itself, if at all?

- **A Web marketing campaign.** Having a Web site is only the first step. Getting clients to find it once it is built is harder than most people think.

A No. 1 ranking does not happen by chance. Every top-ranking Web site has been achieved through a monumental

amount of effort. Search engines look for many aspects that are relevant to the search criteria and popularity of the Web site.

Hiring a reputable search engine optimization company can be a help. Prices vary based on the search areas under which a business wants to be found. The higher the demand, the higher the price. A regular Houston-area top ranking in any kind of business may cost about \$300 a month, and results may not be seen for a few months. Nobody can guarantee or offer instant top placement in search engines.

For instant results, search engines also offer pay-per-click campaigns. This allows clients to name their price. The highest bidder gets top placement. In most cases, this process takes as little as 72 hours to be fully functional.

Pay-per-click campaigns are effective for specialized businesses that do not have many other businesses fighting for the same leads. Bids range from 10 cents to \$999, depending on the search criteria. Average cost is 50 cents to a few dollars. There is only a charge when the Web site is actually visited. This is the way search engines and some Web sites make their money. ■

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