

Your website strategy

A website lets you put your products in front of a worldwide audience. It can help you find new clients, boost revenue, cut costs and build better relationships with both customers and suppliers.

Virtually all businesses will benefit from a website. This briefing will help you decide a strategy for building one.

This briefing covers:

- The benefits of setting up a website.
- The costs involved.
- How you can make money from your site.

1 The business benefits

You can reach new customers and improve communications with existing customers through a website. You can also sell online and use forums or blogs to solicit feedback and show the individuals behind your business.

1.1 Improve marketing to existing customers.

- Keep customers up-to-date about new products and special offers.
- Provide a forum for customer feedback.
- Publishing costs are low, so provide as much detail as you want. Organise information logically, so customers can find what they need.

1.2 Address **new markets**, national and global.

- You can reach potential buyers anywhere in the country, or anywhere in the world. You may wish to translate your website into other languages, or register domain

names for other countries. Be aware of complications of law, delivery and payment when trading internationally.

- If you operate in a niche, potential customers from further afield will find you through search engines.

1.3 **Cut costs** by providing technical information and after-sales support online.

- Compile lists of frequently asked questions (FAQs) so that your customers can find answers to many of their own queries.
- List contact details for distributors or stockists.
- Give extra information to help customers order the right items first time.
- Allow customers to send you messages online, rather than calling you.

Directors' Briefing

a book in four pages

More than 160 briefings are now available.

If you need further information or help, ask the distributor of this briefing about the services available to you.

1.4 Protect existing **revenue** streams and generate new ones.

- Set up an online shop to sell your products or information services online (see **4.1**).
- Carry advertisements which generate revenue when people click them (see **4.2**).

1.5 Recruit people with specialised skills, knowledge and experience.

- Advertise job opportunities on your site.

Once your website is set up, space on it is effectively free.

Whenever you have an idea that involves putting out extra information to help your

customers, suppliers or employees, you can try it at no cost.

2 Exploiting your website

A website can make it possible to deliver existing services more efficiently, as well as new ones.

2.1 Publish an **online catalogue** of goods and services.

- Visitors can learn about your products and make a selection at their own pace.
- Catalogues can be updated instantly, with no need to print and distribute them. This makes it easier to run promotions or change product lines.

2.2 Create a **shopping site**, so visitors can buy from you 24 hours a day (see **4.1**).

- An off-the-shelf ecommerce package will let you build a basic shopping site easily.
- Running an online shop can have a significant impact on your stock systems, IT and logistics.

2.3 Provide product updates and service **information** for your existing customers.

- Frequently-changing information can be easily updated at regular intervals, or even in real time.

2.4 Encourage your customers to **get involved** with your website.

- Use a blog to show the personalities behind your business and invite customer comments.
- Provide space for customers to submit reviews of your products or services.

3 How much will it cost?

Costs are determined by the level of sophistication you build into your website.

3.1 For a comparatively **small, simple site**, the costs will be modest.

- Registering your domain name, ie `www.yourcompany.com`, for two years could cost from £6.
- A web-hosting plan will make your site accessible on the Internet. Hosting starts from £3 a month.
- You can create a basic site with a website builder. These use templates and hide the website code. Some hosting companies will

Getting started

To create a website you need to establish a location and organise the content.

A The usual way to establish a **location** is to rent space for your website on a server run by a web-hosting company.

- Your web-hosting company can also register a domain name — the unique address identifying your site, like `www.yourcompany.com`.
- The cost of hosting will depend on the features you need, and how many visitors you expect your site to receive.
- If your website grows to exceed the capacity of your hosting, you may be charged. Choose a package which you can upgrade easily as your site grows.

B Before purchasing from a web host, check how they deal with **downtime**.

- Look for a service level agreement (SLA). This will guarantee availability of your website, and commits the web host to restoring service within a certain amount of time if your site goes down.
- Make sure the hosting service includes backups. This will keep your company's data safe.

C For maximum impact, employ **professional designers** to develop your page content.

- A good designer will know how to make the best use of the technology.
- Recommendations are the best way to find a good designer.
- Always ask for references and look closely at their previous work.

sell a site builder with hosting and a domain name at a discount.

- If your business lacks the necessary in-house technical knowledge, it may be wise to hire a designer.

3.2 Costs will be higher for a **more complex site**, but the impact will be greater.

- Consider employing a website manager and a web designer, especially if you will make frequent changes to your pages.
- You will probably need a developer to add extra features to your site — such as search tools, or a 'shopping-cart' system for online sales.
- If you open an ecommerce site (see **4.1**), additional costs may include commission on sales to a shopping software supplier and bank fees for processing credit cards.

If this is your first website, consider commissioning an established design agency to devise and build your site. This can seem expensive at first, but is likely to prove better value for money, as you will end up with a professional site which is easier to update.

Security

Security is important for any website.

A All reputable web-hosting companies will take **security precautions**.

- Make sure your hosting company uses firewalls, and updates their systems on a regular basis.
- Physical security is important too. Your web host should be able to explain where their servers are located and how they are protected from theft, fire and flooding.

B For **online payments**, you need to set up a secure link to the online bank or credit card authorisation service you use.

- Many web-hosting services offer this as an option. It can be easier to pay extra for this than building your own system.

C You can take **offline payments**, over the phone.

- This is safe and also economical, but the extra hassle may put customers off.
- Never ask customers to send payment details through email. This is not secure.

4 Making money

Even if your site is mainly designed to improve communication with your customers, it may offer revenue-raising opportunities.

4.1 You can sell **products and services** direct from your site.

- Once set up, a website is a cheap and efficient method of making sales.
- Margins can be unusually high, because there is no wholesaler or retailer involved.
- The best sellers are commodity goods such as CDs that can be sold at reduced prices, reflecting low overheads.
- The web is ideal for selling things that buyers find hard to track down.
- Service industries can also sell online. Travel agents, hotels, plumbers and dentists all take bookings on the web.

Payment is the critical factor when selling online. You can purchase an e-commerce package or online payment system to safely accept card payments. You should not request credit card details by email, as this is not secure.

4.2 Even small sites can make money from advertising, although you will need a **large audience** to generate a significant income.

- Pay-per-click adverts are most common. These small blocks of text are inserted into your site by search engines. You receive a small payment each time one is clicked.
- You can also sell banner adverts. These graphical adverts link to an advertiser's site.
- Advertising rates vary wildly, depending on the nature and performance of the adverts.
- You can sign up to the major search engines' pay-per-click advertising programmes online. Contact a specialist online ad agency if you think you have an audience for banner adverts.

4.3 If you offer information which is impossible to find elsewhere, you may be able to **charge for access** to your site.

- People are very reluctant to pay for information online, so this model is only viable for websites in specialist areas.

5 Making a site successful

Stick to a simple, clear design that delivers what your customers are hoping to find.

5.1 Provide an **information service**, not just an online catalogue.

- For example, Amazon.co.uk offers reviews and interviews, as well as a vast range of books, CDs and DVDs.

5.2 Use a **news section** to add impact.

- Grab people's attention by displaying news and offers on the first page of your site.
- Up-to-date news keeps your website fresh and may be valued by visitors.

5.3 Make visitors feel **involved** by asking for their opinions and respecting their interests.

- Include links to other interesting sites. Contact businesses offering products which complement your own, and set up reciprocal links.
- Links can be coded to open up in a new window, so that people who follow them do not actually leave your site.

5.4 Make the site relevant to **global audiences**.

- Set up localised pages for key overseas markets, with details of dealers and prices.

5.5 Ensure your site is **efficient**, attractive and free from design glitches and spelling errors.

- Keep it simple. Cluttered designs with too many graphics take too long to download.
- Check that every link works. There are free online services which will check your site's links regularly.
- Test your site with all the major browsers including Microsoft Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox, Opera, Safari and Google Chrome.

6 Attracting visitors

6.1 Optimise your site for **search engines**.

- Search engines are one of the main ways that people will find your site.
- Ensure you follow search engine optimisation guidelines when building your site.

6.2 Consider using **pay-per-click advertising** on search engines to attract visitors.

6.3 Use email to let a **targeted list** of potential customers know about your site.

- You must obtain your recipients' prior consent before sending them any marketing emails.

- You can rent an email list from a broker. Check that list members opt to be included.
- Keep your email short and simple. Test it carefully and make sure major email services do not flag it up as spam.

6.4 Issue a **press release** when the site launches.

- PR websites will pick this up and link to your site.
- Other relevant sites and industry magazines may mention your site.

6.5 Negotiate to **exchange links** with relevant but non-competing organisations.

- If your trade or industry body has a website, ask for a link to your site.
- Contact anyone you know who might be able to spread the word.

6.6 Plug your site in all **company literature**.

- Include it in your letterhead and business cards, as well as flyers and advertisements.

7 Getting help

Word-of-mouth recommendation and advice from business friends will be more help than books, which are soon out of date.

7.1 Business Link has IT advisers.

- They can put you in touch with specialist designers and agencies. Contact Business Link on 0845 600 9 006.

7.2 Choose a **consultant** who has been recommended by someone you trust, or who worked on a website that you like.

- Internet and business magazines often run features about web design agencies.
- Make sure you check a designer's portfolio and references.

7.3 You must ensure that your website complies with the **Disability Discrimination Act**. For DDA-related information, visit the Equality and Human Rights Commission website: www.equalityhumanrights.com.

© BHP Information Solutions Ltd 2009. ISSN 1469-0470. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted without the written permission of the publisher. This publication is for general guidance only. The publisher, expert contributors and distributor disclaim all liability for any errors or omissions. Consult your local business support organisation or your professional adviser for help and advice.