

NET RESULTS

Seven steps to a web site that works—and works for you. BY ELA SCHWARTZ

TODAY'S CUSTOMERS ARE more likely than ever to turn to the Web when they want to learn about a business or look for products and services. But all too often web sites are repositories of poorly written text and ghastly looking, difficult-to-navigate layouts that merely frustrate visitors who can't find the information they need. Then those potential customers turn to one of myriad competitors, who, after all, are merely a mouse click away. To avoid that unhappy outcome, it pays to put some thought into how your site looks and functions.

1 Plan it out. Start with a plan that includes an analysis of your target market and how to promote your site, urges Nelly Yusupova, CTO of Webgrlls International and founder of the New York-based web site design company DigitalWoman.com.

2 Make it easy to use. Include a navigation bar on every page; remember that many users will bypass your home page entirely via a search engine. Have these “navbars” either run horizontally across the top of the page or stretch vertically down the left side. Black upper- and lowercase text on a white background is easier to read than colorful type on patterned backgrounds. Hire a copywriter, if your budget allows, and be sure to edit and proofread your copy.

3 Don't go nuts for bells and whistles. Steer clear of scrolling text, videos, animated graphics, slide shows, audio, and other embellishments unless

there's a justifiable reason to include them. Yusupova says businesspeople often go for the latest techno-feature “because it's cool, not because it will help them improve their online business.” She advises that rather than using technology for its own sake, weigh what the purpose of the feature is and how it will help you achieve your goals.

4 Static or dynamic? Static web sites are created using HTML code and do not change unless updated by someone familiar with that code. Dynamic web sites can be easily updated through a simple browser interface. Which is best for you depends on your business and your need to—and comfort level with—making site updates.

If, for example, you're a restaurant owner who simply wants a site that tells a little about your eatery, offers a sample menu, the location and contact information, a static web site is fine. But with a dynamic web site, you can easily update your site to list the daily specials or seasonal holiday menus. Although static sites are initially less expensive and labor-intensive to get up and running, dynamic sites “allow for easier web site maintenance and management, and in the long term probably save time and money,” explains Yusupova.

5 Get noticed. Customers won't visit your site if they don't know it exists and usually find their way via search engines. Search engines look for relevant words in your text as well as “key

words” in “tags” that are invisible to your visitors. Try to incorporate the 15 to 20 words potential customers are most likely to type when searching for your business's products or services.

6 Go behind the scenes. With a web site statistics program, you can analyze visitor behavior, including which key words found your site, the pages viewed, and the length of time spent on the site. These insights can help you determine which information is the most useful to your customers and whether you should modify your web site to make it more effective.

7 Get respect. Even the most formidable executive in the boardroom can be intimidated by tech talk. And let's face it, the technology field is still dominated by men—some of whom may assume women aren't wired to understand the subject. Yusupova says women need to get more involved and not be afraid to ask questions. “Your tech consultant is your partner. If you are willing to learn, it is their job to educate you.”

And if they don't? Give them the boot. “There are so many good and professional companies that will make the process of building your web site a pleasure,” she continues. “By taking the business away from the ‘jerks,’ we can ensure that they either change their behavior or go out of business.” •

