

***What You Need To Know
Before
You Hire a Website Designer***

A Beginners Guide to Website Design



***by Mark Frank
Apple Website Design***

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What You Need To Know Before You Get a Website

About the Author

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With an advanced degree in management, extensive training in website design, and years of experience helping small businesses and new designers succeed on the Internet, Mark knows what it takes to make your business thrive.

A Note to the Reader

If you find any problems with the book (typos, out of date or incorrect information) please contact me through any of the Online Support sites listed below. Similarly, if you feel that there are additional topics that should be included, please let me know so that I can consider including them in futures revisions.

In return for giving you this ebook, I ask one small thing of you. Please help me spread the word so we can share this book with others. If you belong to any website designer groups (email lists, online forums, blogs, designer communities, etc.) please give your fellow designers a link to www.WebsiteDesignBiz.com so that they can get their own free copy directly from me. Please do not forward or share your copy.

Online Support

There are several companion websites that provide support, tools, and resources that can help both new and experienced website designers...

- AnnapolisHosting.com Hosting Support for Website Designers
- WebsiteDesignBiz.com Tools for Website Designers
- AppleWebsiteDesign.com Website Design Services for Small Businesses
- SunriseDesigns.com References, Tools, & Tips for Website Designers



What You Need To Know Before You Get a Website

Also by Mark Frank

Start Your Own Home-Based Website Design Business

In *Start Your Own Home-Based Website Design Business*, Mark guides the reader step-by-step through the complex process of setting up and running a successful website design business.



Available at <http://www.websitedesignbiz.com>

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INTRODUCTION

- Are you considering getting a website, but don't know where to start?
- Are you unsure about how to select a designer?
- Are you thinking about designing your own site?
- Do you feel confused about what to put into a website?

If you are like most people, chances are you answered “Yes” to at least one of these questions. And chances are that you could use a little help.

At Apple Website Design, our mission is to support small businesses, home-based businesses, and private organizations that are moving to the Internet for the first time. We know firsthand how much time it takes to operate a small business – providing customer support, tracking inventory, marketing, advertising, managing money, paying the bills, and of course, providing your services and products. There isn't enough time to do everything.

It takes a lot of time and energy to run a business – providing customer support, tracking inventory, marketing, advertising, managing money, paying the bills, and of course, providing your services and products. There isn't enough time to do everything. And now you have realized that your business needs a website.

You need a place to start.

This was written for you – the professional, the small business owner, and the home business owner – anyone who is trying to figure out what the Internet is and how to use it to promote a business. Hopefully, it will answer some of your questions about putting your business online so that you can make the right decisions when you are ready to get a website.

So let's get started.

Mark Frank
Apple Website Design
Websites that mean Business
<http://www.AppleWebsiteDesign.com>

THE BASICS

To begin, let's assume that you know nothing about websites other than that they are the things that come up on your computer screen when you get on the Internet. You may not even be sure what the Internet really is. So let's start there.

WHAT IS THE INTERNET?

If you hook two computers together so that they can talk to each other and share files, it is called a network. It requires two computers, two cables, and a router. The computers talk and listen and the cables carry the signals from each computer to the router. The router is a little box that decides which computer talks, and when. It makes sure that the computers talk in turns so that they don't interrupt each other.

If you want to network twenty computers together, you will need twenty computers, twenty cables, and several routers. You will also need some extra cables so that the individual routers can talk to each other. Now when the computers talk to each other, the signals go from the first computer, through the first router, through the second router, and then to the listening computer. The routers talk among themselves to decide which computer talks, and when.

Now imagine a network of hundreds of thousands of computers. The computers are in business offices, universities, and your home. Phone lines, television cables, and satellite links have replaced the cables. The routers are scattered all over the world.

That is the Internet.

WHAT IS A WEBSITE?

It may seem like a big deal, but a website is just a bunch of files on a computer somewhere. That computer has a permanent high-speed access line to the Internet and it is called a Host. When you visit a website, your computer copies these files from the Host and displays them on your monitor.

The files that you see are usually text or graphics, but they can also include sound, video, and other types of information. The text files are usually written in a language called Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML). This language defines how the file looks on your computer when you see it as a website. It determines where things appear on your monitor, how big they are, what color the text is, and so on. The graphics files are the images that you see. They can be photographs, drawings, cartoons, or movies.

USE YOUR WEBSITE TO PROMOTE YOUR BUSINESS

You know what a website is now. It's a group of files that you view from another computer over the Internet.

But to a business, a website is much more than just files.

To a business, a website is a marketing tool. It is a form of advertisement just like an ad in a newspaper or a magazine. And it has the same goal – to increase your company's profits. In this respect, it is no different than any other form of advertising you might use to promote your business.

But websites have several advantages that other forms of advertising don't.

- Websites are interactive. Your customers can explore those areas that interest them, follow links, and contact you by email.
- Your website gives your customers 24 hour access to your business. It doesn't matter where you are or what time it is, your website continues to work.
- A website is not space limited. You can describe your products and services in as much detail as you wish without being constrained to a small printed advertising space.
- Websites are market focused. When you advertise in print, you typically broadcast your message to a very wide audience, and many of them are not good prospects. But someone who visits your website is already searching for your products or services.
- Websites last beyond today's paper or this month's magazine. Once you put a website online, it stays there until you decide to take it down.

This isn't to say that all other forms of advertising are useless. Print advertising, television commercials, and direct mail still have their place, and if you have a print advertising campaign that is bringing in customers – stick with it, just be sure to add your new website address to all of your print materials.

CAN YOU MANAGE A WEBSITE?

You don't need to be a mechanic to own a car. As long as you can drive it and put gas in it, you can operate your own car. If it ever needs to be fixed, there are people available to do that.

A website is the same way. If you have enough basic computer skills to get onto the Internet and send and receive email, you can manage your website. Email will let you correspond with visitors to your site, with customers, and with your site designer. You don't need to know a lot about websites to get started. A good designer will guide you through the development process and will do all of the design work for you. Your designer will also update your site for you if it ever needs it.

If you want more out of a website – an online store for example – you need a little more computer knowledge. An online store enables you to access customer order data, download it to your own computer, and process the orders and credit card information. If you can use a word processor and can move files around on your computer, you already have the skills you need to run an online store.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE COST?

Website design prices are competitive with the cost of designing print advertising. The cost depends on the size of the site, special features, the designer's rates, and the number of hours required to do the job. But this is true with any form of advertising. If you want to have a print ad designed for a national magazine or just for a local newspaper insert, you will still have to pay for the design, the copywriting, and the printing. The complexity of the ad drives the price, just as it does with a website.

But after the initial design is done, websites are much, much cheaper than print ads. To keep a small print ad in a daily paper or in a monthly magazine will cost you hundreds of dollars per month. A full-page color ad can cost thousands of dollars every month.

You can keep a website online for less than \$20 per month. And it doesn't matter how big the website is or how many colors it uses.

DOES YOUR BUSINESS REALLY NEED A WEBSITE?

For most of us, the Internet started out as a curiosity. It was like a video game. It was entertaining, but it had no real importance to the average person. But things have changed. The commercial world has moved on to the Internet and changed it forever. It is now the fastest growing advertising and distribution channel on the planet. Businesses are moving to the Internet at an incredible rate.

Your customers are moving there too.

Every day thousands of new computers are sold to people who want email and Internet access. They want to be a part of what is going on. Once they figure out how the

computer and the Internet work, they are hooked. They spend hours sending email and surfing.

They quickly learn to use search engines instead of the phone book. They use email instead of the telephone. They learn to find products and services from websites. After they are on the Internet long enough to be comfortable, they begin to buy products and services online.

If you are not on the Internet, your customers are buying from your competitors.

Local or worldwide, if you have a business that is not on the Internet, you are at a severe competitive disadvantage. Even if you build a website that doesn't do any direct sales, a website gives you a contact point and a chance to put your name, your products, and your services on display for potential customers.

The expectations of the buying public have changed. Every day it gets harder and harder to find a magazine ad or a business card that doesn't have a website address included. Your customers expect you to have a website and an email address, just as they expect you to have a mailing address and a telephone number.

Commerce is changing rapidly to embrace the Internet. Big businesses are on the Internet. Small businesses are on the Internet. Home businesses are on the Internet. Your competitors are on the Internet.

So to answer the question – yes, your business needs a website. The Internet has revolutionized the world just as radio did, just as the telephone did, and just as television did. It continues to grow and it's not going to go away. People shop on the Internet, people pay bills on the Internet, people find services on the Internet, and people are entertained on the Internet. One way or another, almost everyone is on the Internet.

Your business should be there too.

THE FINAL DECISION

Sooner or later, your business will have a website. The size of the viewing market and the level of exposure you get, combined with the low costs, make it too good a deal to pass up. And no other form of advertising offers you this tremendous level of market access for less than \$1.00 per day.

What you really need to decide is who is going to design your new site and what goes into it. The following chapters will help you with this.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Technically, a website is nothing more than files on a computer somewhere on the Internet.
- To a business, a website is a powerful marketing and advertising tool. It attracts people who are actively looking for your services or products.
- Your website can be used to promote products, services, or any facet of your organization. It can also provide information and services to your visitors twenty-four hours a day.
- Website design costs are competitive with other forms of promotion, but the recurring monthly costs are much, much lower.

BEFORE YOU CALL A DESIGNER...

Before you launch into your Internet adventure, you need to determine what kind of website you need and what your site is supposed to do.

Is your website going to be an e-commerce site that sells products and services? Is it strictly for brand name recognition? Does your site offer some sort of online customer service? Do you want your site to gather information about visitors?

Websites can do a lot of things. Before you talk to any designers, you need some idea of what you want your website to do. Your ideas will probably change as you talk to your designers and get the benefit of their experience, but you should give it some thought so that you have a starting point for discussions.

WHAT DO YOU NEED FROM YOUR WEBSITE?

A site can serve many different functions all at the same time, but for a small business, the bottom line is always the same.

Your website should increase business and help generate revenue. If your site doesn't improve customer contact, bring in customers, or create revenue, it may not be a good business decision.

You need to define the functions of your website. If you don't have a clear set of goals and requirements, you will not spend your time and money effectively. Before you can define your website, you must define your business needs.

Take a few minutes to review the following groups of questions. Answer as many as possible. This is the information you need to define your website and it is the information your designer will need to develop an effective site for you.

Describe Your Business or Organization

- What does your organization do?
- What products or services do you sell?
- How do you sell them now?
- Who are your competitors?
- How are you different from or better than your competitors?

Define Your Customers and Their Needs

- Who is the target market?
- How many different kinds of customers do you have?
- What kind of information do your customers want?
- What response do you want from your customers?

Define The Goals For Your Website

- Create revenue through direct sales
- Communicate with customers and potential customers
- Provide information and answer questions
- Provide online services
- Enhance your business image
- Get increased exposure
- Generate leads
- Gather customer information
- Display your products and services

Use the answers to these questions to define the main goals for your site. If you can define one or two very clear goals for your site, it will be much more effective than if it has no goals or if it has dozens of goals. Your goal statements should be clear and should be very short. They are generally stated in terms of what you want the site to do or what you want your visitors to do.

Sample Goal Statements

- Promote our employment seminars to the recently unemployed
- Sell my new book to people who collect stamps
- Attract new members to our organization
- Provide information about our services and activities
- Gather customer information online
- Provide a ready source of information to our customers
- Encourage visitors to contact us for information and quotes

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Before You Call a Designer...

DEVELOP A CONCEPT FOR YOUR WEBSITE

Your life, and your designer's, will be much easier if you have some idea of what you want to put in your website. After you have determined the goals for your site, you should spend an hour or two searching the Internet to find sites that offer similar products or services. Look at how they are designed. Look for special features that you might want to include in your own site. Identify things that you don't want in your site.

Search some more and find some sites that really appeal to you. Then find three or four that you really don't like. Jot down the addresses of all of these along with notes on what appeals to you and what doesn't. Consider things like navigation (menus), color schemes, how easy the site is to use, etc.

Note that you are not trying to design the site. You are just trying to get enough information so that you can give your designer an idea of what you want.

When you have done all of this, you will be ready to talk to a designer. You will know the goals for your site and what it should include. You will also be able to give your designer some general direction as to a look and feel for your new website.

If it turns out that you have trouble putting exactly what you want and need in a website into words, that's all right. Your designer will be able to help you with this. That's what a designer does. And you will find that just having gone through the process of reviewing your business and other websites will help you communicate with your designer.

HOW TO FIND A WEBSITE DESIGNER

Now that you have some idea of what you want to put into your website, it's time to find a designer and the most obvious place to look for a website designer is on the Internet. Go to your favorite search engine and type in WEBSITE DESIGN or WEB SITE DESIGN, or WEB PAGE DESIGN. You will find that you have hundreds to choose from. Look for a firm that will meet your business needs.

Another good way to find a designer is by word of mouth. If you know someone with a good site, ask who designed it. If this approach doesn't work, surf the Internet and look for websites that appeal to you. Many designers include a signature link at the bottom of every page on the sites they design.

Others places to look are the newspaper and the phone book. These will produce designers in your area, but may limit the number of choices you have. Remember, this is

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Before You Call a Designer...

the Internet. Your designer may live on the other side of the country. But with email and the telephone, that's OK. That's the way business is done on the Internet.

Once you have found some likely candidates, send them an email, or better yet, call them. The phone lets you discuss ideas interactively – something you can't do in an email. Some designers do not include their phone numbers on their websites. If this is the case, send an email and ask them to call you.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A DESIGNER

A website can be an asset to your business if it is done properly. But it can become a tremendous drain on your time and resources if it is not, so be sure to choose your designer carefully. There are many designers who would be willing to design a website for you, and selecting the right one can be confusing.

When you choose a designer, don't use your neighbor or the kid down the street who says, "I know how to make a web page, there's nothing to it." A website is a marketing tool and there is much more to creating an effective website than just getting "something" online. The success of your business depends on presenting the right image to the public. Do it right – hire an experienced designer who understands that your site is a marketing tool for your business.

When you first contact a designer, you should expect a lengthy discussion to determine your business needs and to answer many of your basic questions about your site and websites in general. Avoid designers who only ask about site layout options and payment without asking you about your business needs. You should get questions like these:

- What does your business do?
- What is the function of this site?
- Who is the target audience?
- What kind of response do you want from your visitors?
- How many different kinds of customers do you have?
- What kind of information do the users want?
- Do your competitors have websites?

When you select a designer, be wary of anyone who says, "I can make a six page site in two days for only \$350." They are probably selling pre-packaged, pre-designed solutions that meet their business needs, not yours. Prices that seem too low usually are. Solutions that seem too easy may not give you what you need.

What You Need To Know Before You Hire a Website Designer

Before You Call a Designer...

Select a designer who makes you feel comfortable. If you have trouble communicating with a designer before you sign a contract, you will have trouble after. Pick someone who answers your questions and is easy to work with.

Ask to see samples of their work. Most designers display these on their sites. Explore the samples. Send an email to the site owners and ask if they were satisfied with the work that was done. Ask if there were any problems. It only takes a minute to send an email and it can save you lots of money and hours of aggravation. Look carefully at websites done by your prospective designers. Are they visually appealing? Are they easy to navigate, or do you find yourself getting lost? If you don't like the work they have done, don't use them.

At the end of the discussion, ask for a cost quote for your site. You may get an answer immediately, or the designer may need to do some preparation. Proposals vary in size and complexity. Some will consist of a brief paragraph and a quote. Others will include a detailed site development plan and a schedule. Whatever form it takes, review the proposal to make sure that it addresses all of your needs.

When you select a designer, don't base the decision solely on the lowest cost. A low price on a bad website is not a good investment. Instead, try to get the best value for your money.

THE WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The website development process can be broken down into four distinct phases:

- Contracting
- Preliminary Design
- Detailed Design
- Search Engine Submission

Smaller jobs may combine some of the phases, and larger job may add more, but one way or the other, all of these steps have to happen.

Contracting

During the first phase of the development of your new website, you will talk with your designer so that you both have a common understanding of the goals of the site and the work required to complete the job. This is also your opportunity to have all of your questions answered.

What You Need To Know Before You Hire a Website Designer

Before You Call a Designer...

Your designer will then present a proposal. Depending on the designer and the size of the job, this may be a formal proposal or it may just be a verbal quote.

If you agree to the proposal, you will probably be asked to sign a contract. The contract should define who is going to do the work and what they are going to do. Costs and payments should be clearly spelled out. When you return the signed contract, you will also be asked to send the first payment (or the entire payment if it is a small job.)

Preliminary Design

After you have signed a contract, the preliminary design of your website will begin. Your designer will typically perform the following steps during this time:

- Register your domain name
- Set up hosting
- Develop a site map (table of contents) for your site
- Design the page layout that will form the basis of all the pages in your website
- Create the navigation structure (menus)
- Design preliminary artwork and graphics

When this work is finished, you will be asked to review and approve it. Some designers actually do all of their development work online so that you can watch the site develop.

If you are not satisfied with the initial design or if you want changes made, now is the time to say so – before too much work is done. If you wait until later, your designer may have to change every page in the site and you will be charged for the extra work.

Once you are satisfied with the initial design, you will usually be expected to send approval in writing and send a partial payment so that the work can continue.

Detailed Design

Now your individual pages will be created and built into a website. Before this effort can be completed, you will be required to send in all of your submissions to the site. Your designer will do the following:

- Create the individual pages
- Link all pages
- Finalize all graphics
- Incorporate special features

Upon completion of this phase, you will once again be asked to approve the work. You will also be expected to send the final payment.

Search Engine Submission

The last step in the development of your site is search engine submission. After both you and your designer are satisfied with the site, it will be submitted to the search engines. If your contract includes any follow up support, it will also occur during this phase.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Before you contact a designer, do your homework and define the goals for your website.
- Select some sites that appeal to you so that you and your designer both have an understanding of what you want.
- Choose your designer carefully. Talk, look at work samples, and assure yourself that the two of you can work together. Ask any questions you may have and make sure that he or she asks the right questions of you.
- The purpose of your website is to promote your business or organization. Doing it yourself is a good option if you have experience in website design or with Internet marketing. If you don't have the experience, hire someone who does.

UNDERSTANDING WEBSITE COSTS

Most people starting out on the Internet have no idea what a professionally designed website will cost. If you are expecting to have a site designed for \$200, you may go into "sticker shock." If you are expecting to pay \$20,000 to \$30,000, you are going to be greatly relieved. Websites vary in complexity. Depending on the features you need, you could pay anywhere from hundreds to thousands of dollars.

WEBSITE COST DRIVERS

It is impossible to tell you exactly what your site will cost because there are so many factors that drive the final cost of a website. The following items are the most common cost drivers in any website.

There are five costs associated with getting a basic website:

1. Registering a domain name
2. Hosting your site
3. Designing your site
4. Maintaining your site
5. Paying search engine registration fees

If you want to operate an online store, then you also have to allow for:

6. Installing a shopping cart
7. Paying merchant account fees
8. Updating the store

Choosing and Registering a Domain Name

Registering a domain name (www.yourname.com) is the easiest and cheapest part of getting a website. You can register a domain name for less than \$15 per year. The registration needs to be renewed every year, or you can just register the name for several years. For most businesses, the .com version of the domain is the only one you'll need. If you can't get the .com domain name you want, either create an alternative name or consider the .net, .org, .us (or other country suffix), or .biz versions – but it's best to have the .com.

Hosting Your Site

To get your website on the Internet, you have to rent space on a computer that has high speed Internet access. This is called hosting. Hosting prices typically run from \$20 to \$30 per month for full service hosting. There may also be an initial set up fee. Some firms require yearly payments in advance and others require monthly payments. If you shop around, you can find cheaper hosting, but you may give up features you need.

Selection of a host can be a tough decision. You have to carefully compare costs and features, and if you aren't familiar with computers and the Internet, it is hard to make informed decisions. One of the advantages of hiring a design firm is that these decisions are taken care of for you. Many designers provide hosting as part of their services. Those designers who do not offer hosting usually have a working relationship with someone who does.

Designing Your Site

Designing your site is where the bulk of the expense comes in, and it is impossible to define a generic cost. Prices are driven by

- What you want and need in your site
- The designer's hourly rate
- The size of your site
- Software development (e.g., JavaScripts, CGI, etc.)
- Custom artwork
- Copywriting

Prices for a four or five page site will vary from \$600 or \$700 for "package deals" to thousands of dollars for a custom design. Some package deals are a good value for the money because the designers will be focused on developing a good marketing tool for your business. Other designers will put your submissions into a pre-made format and put it online, whether or not this design is right for you. Fortunately, you can tell the difference between these two very quickly by talking to them on the phone.

If you want a custom designed website to display your products and services with nice features like online forms and custom artwork, then \$1,200 to \$5,000 is a reasonable price from smaller design firms.

Maintaining Your Site

Once your site is on the Internet, keeping it there can be fairly cheap. To keep your site online, you have to pay your monthly hosting fee and annual domain name renewal. You can keep a site on the Internet for less than \$30 per month. If you maintain your site yourself, or if your website needs no updating, there are no site maintenance charges. If you decide to have someone else maintain, update, and track the performance of your site, you can expect to pay for an hour or two per month at \$50 to \$100 per hour.

Paying Search Engine Registration Fees

Some search engines charge to list your site. Others charge just to review them and do not guarantee to list them after the review. Still others list your site and rank it by how much you pay.

It is not realistic to define search engine fees here. Rates are constantly changing and the search engine that is free today may charge tomorrow. Furthermore, the relationships between search engines change frequently as well (they form partnerships and share listings.) But to give you an estimate, you should expect to pay about \$500 in search engine registration fees.

When you talk to your designer, be sure that search engine fees are discussed. There is little point in getting a beautiful site and then not listing it with the most popular search engines.

Installing a Shopping Cart

If you wish to sell products on the Internet, you will need to purchase or lease the software to take orders and collect credit card information. This is your shopping cart. Leasing fees vary from \$29 to \$100 per month. You can also buy your own shopping cart software. Prices for full featured carts start about \$50 and go up from there.

As an alternative, many hosting services provide shopping carts as part of the hosting service. This may increase your monthly hosting fees slightly, but it has the advantage of online support.

Paying Merchant Account Fees

To use credit cards on your website, you will need to get a merchant account. This is an account that accepts and processes credit card transactions. Merchant accounts are available from a variety of sources at a wide range of prices.

There are a lot of fees associated with taking credit cards on line. You can expect:

- One time set up fees (up to \$200)
- Statement fees (about \$10 per month)
- Discount rate (2.5% to 5% of every sale)
- Transaction fees (\$0.10 to \$0.45 per transaction)
- Gateway fees (\$15 to \$25 per month)

It is difficult to say how much it costs to take credit cards because there is so much variation in price from one merchant account provider to the next. As a general rule, you should expect to pay \$100 per month or less.

You also have another option. There are several companies around that provide third party credit card processing. Basically, you sell products and services from your site and they handle the credit card processing for a percentage of sales. Rates typically run from seven to fifteen percent of sales, plus a small fee per transaction. These are ideal for low volume sales and for online retailers who are just starting out.

Updating the Store

As your product line changes, it may be necessary to add or subtract products in your online store. Many shopping cart packages have simple interfaces. If you are planning to do online sales and your inventory changes on a regular basis, ask your designer to select a shopping cart that will allow you to do updates from your home computer. If you are not comfortable with this, your designer can always do it for you at an hourly rate.

THE BOTTOM LINE

So what does this mean to you? What does it really cost to get a website?

The answer is – “It depends.”

It depends on what you need in your site and on how much work your designer has to do. The only way to get a good estimate for your site is to define what you need as carefully as possible and contact some designers for cost estimates.

HOW DESIGNERS CHARGE

There are three ways that site designers typically charge: flat rate, hourly rate, and per item.

Some design shops will quote a flat rate to design your site. For a set fee they will design your website, develop the graphics, etc.

Other design shops charge strictly by the hour. If you choose a designer who charges by the hour, be sure to get a final price estimate and a "Not To Exceed" cost in the contract. This protects you from cost overruns, but it is not a guarantee that your site will be complete when the "Not To Exceed" value is reached.

Still other design firms will quote the design of your site based on the items you request in your site. They will have a basic rate to start your site, then add fees based on the features you choose. There will be a charge to develop the layout and the first few pages. After this they will start adding on fees for extra pages, custom graphics, etc. This is not unlike buying a car. You pay for the options one at a time or in "packages."

In practice, your final contract may include any or all of the fee structures. It is common to have a flat fee to design and develop the site, additional fees for special features, and hourly rates for changes and updates.

Is there a best way? No. Your main concerns are the final price and getting a website that meets your needs. Select a designer that you are satisfied with. Agree on a price and make sure everything is written in the contract and that you understand it.

PAYMENT SCHEDULES

Like most service providers, website designers often require partial payment before the work starts, with periodic or milestone payments as the work goes on. A good guideline is one third before design starts, one third when the site map and page layout are complete, and the final third upon site completion. For smaller jobs (\$750 or less), it is not unusual to pay the full amount before the work begins.

GUARANTEES AND REFUNDS

Website designers, like most service organizations, don't sell products. They sell their time and their skills. And unfortunately, time is not a refundable commodity. It can't be returned. It can't be repackaged and sold to someone else.

If you decide that you don't like the end product, or you don't want a site after all, you should generally not expect to get your money back. If the work produced does not meet the terms of the contract, then you certainly have reason to expect that it will be fixed to meet the contract specifications, but refunds are rare.

HOW TO INCREASE YOUR COSTS

It is possible to double or triple your website development costs with almost no effort.

How?

One word – CHANGE.

Your website designer will provide a contract that clearly defines the work to be done and the cost of that work. The contract should allow for a certain amount of change, but if you request significant deviations from the work as described in the contract, you should expect to pay for it. Most contracts include a cost for changes.

Be careful with changes, no matter how small, because small changes can have very large impacts on your wallet. If your site is almost complete and you decide to change a page name (e.g., from About Us to Our Company), the effects can be surprising. Changing the name of a page may seem trivial, but it may require your designer to develop new artwork for the menu and to change every menu and update links on every page. It could take hours and could cost hundreds of dollars.

When you request a change, always ask about the impact and ask for a time and cost quote. Have the quote submitted by email so that you have documentation in case there is a problem later. If it turns out that the cost impact is significant, your designer may request that you authorize it in writing or that you sign an amendment to the contract.

In reality, you will almost certainly want some changes that are not covered by the contract. You should budget an extra ten to twenty percent over the cost of the contract to address these changes. If you don't spend the money, there is no loss, but if you need changes done, you don't want to be caught unprepared.

HOW TO CONTROL YOUR COSTS

The best way to keep your costs under control is to define the site as carefully as possible before you contact a designer. This means creating a goal statement and visiting other sites to get some idea as to what you want and need in your new website.

Once you have selected a designer and signed a contract, you should review your site frequently during its development. Ask your developer to build your site online so that you can watch it develop and grow. Be sure that there are milestones and checkpoints defined in the contract so that you can monitor the site's progress. Watching the site as it is built will help you make sure that the design does not go in the wrong direction. This is much less expensive than making changes after everything is complete.

Verify that your designer knows how to do what is promised. If you ask for something special (a slide show, streaming audio, etc.) make sure your designer knows how to do it. Don't pay an hourly rate for someone to figure these things out. Let them learn on their own time, not yours.

To minimize your costs, work closely with your designer up front to make sure that the website meets your needs. Every time you stop or redirect the work, you should expect to be charged additional fees. Spend as much time as you need defining the site with your designer and learning to speak the language. If there is something you don't understand, ask. If you change your mind on some key point and need the designer to start over, expect the billing to reflect the extra work. Remember, what you get is the finished website, but what you are paying for is the skill, the experience, and the labor hours.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- There are five cost drivers associated with most websites: the domain name, hosting, design, maintenance, and search engine registration.
- There are three additional fees for online stores: the shopping carts, merchant account, and store updates.
- The design cost of your website depends on what you want in your site and how long it takes the designer to provide it.
- The best thing you can do to reduce and control your design cost is to work closely with your designer to define the site goals and site requirements.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD WEBSITE?

There is a difference between having a website and having an effective website. A website displays your goods and services. An effective website converts visitors into paying customers.

Two things drive the effectiveness of your website – mechanics and marketing. The mechanics are the technical aspects of your site: how fast it loads, usability, etc. Marketing is copy (text) that entices your visitors to stay and explore your site.

Your designer should have an understanding of the following topics and should be able to discuss any of them with you.

WEBSITE MECHANICS

The mechanics of your website are the technical features that make it work and make it easy to use. Does the website load quickly, or do your visitors have to sit and wait? Can your visitors find their way around your site, or do they get lost trying to figure out your menus? Can all your visitors see your site, or does it get scrambled because they are using a different browser?

Loading Time

Research has shown that if your pages take more than ten seconds to load, you will lose a substantial portion of your visitors before they even see your site. Internet users can be impatient, and there are too many competing websites around to wait for slow web pages.

This should be a major design driver for your site.

To get your pages loaded quickly, keep the number of pictures and graphics to a minimum. All images should be as small as practical and should be compressed to reduce file size. If it is necessary to include large pictures, place them on interior pages and toward the bottom of the page so that your visitors can read text as the pages load.

Navigation

Your site navigation scheme (menus) must be intuitive and easy to follow. By the time your visitors get to the second page, they must understand how your site is arranged and how to get around. Pages must be clearly labeled in the main menu, and submenus must

be very obvious. If visitors get lost in your site, they are much more likely to leave than they are to struggle with a confusing navigation scheme.

Browser Compatibility

Your website must be compatible with all common browsers and with all common computers. The Netscape browser and the Internet Explorer browser both have unique features. They each recognize web pages that the other browser cannot read. Websites also look different on Personal Computers (PCs) than they do on Macintosh computers (Macs). To be effective, your site must be designed to be viewable with either browser on any home computer.

Special Effects

The word on special effects – Don't! Special effects drive your development cost up and they drive your visitors away. Your visitors are looking for products, services, and information. They are not looking for “cool” effects, commercials, or things that slow page loading.

If you believe that adding special features (animations, music, flashing graphics, etc.) will add something to your site, put them on internal pages, not the first page.

Legibility

Finally, your site should be legible. Avoid small fonts and hard to read fonts (scripts, italics). Be sure that the font color provides high contrast with the page background so that it is easy to read. Poorly designed sites with illegible black text on dark backgrounds are all too common on the Internet. Don't let it happen on your site.

WEBSITE MARKETING

Getting the mechanics under control is only half the battle. It's what happens after the site is displayed on your visitors' monitors that determines how well your website meets its goals. This is the point where your visitors quickly skim over the contents of the page and decide whether your site will meet their needs or not. It is essential that you capture and hold their attention immediately or you will lose them forever.

This is why your site must be designed with a clear set of goals and a well-defined target audience. You have to know who your visitors are and what they need. Keep in mind that your visitors have come to your site looking for products, services, or information.

Remember also that every visitor is only one mouse click away from leaving. If you can't convince them that you have what they want, they're gone.

You only have a few seconds to capture their interest.

Effective Copywriting

Fortunately, the techniques to do this are well known. They are written down in every Marketing 101 textbook. The same methods that work in print, on the radio, and on television also work on the Internet. It is just a matter of knowing and applying them. A good website designer will be able to help you with this by writing your copy or rewriting your first draft.

The basic guidelines are simple – start with well-written and useful content. Give your readers the information they came for. Lay out your pages so that they can be scanned quickly, using headlines, highlighting, and short bulleted lists to emphasize key ideas.

Once you have convinced your visitors that you have what they came for, you have to deliver. The information that you give them should be clear and concise. Paths to contacting you or to purchasing your products should be obvious and obstacle free.

If you don't know how to write captivating copy, select a designer who offers copywriting services in addition to website design services.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The effectiveness of your website is driven by the technical aspects (mechanics) and the marketing aspects (copywriting).
- Your website should be easy to navigate, compatible with your visitor's computer, and quick to load.
- The content, and the design of that content, determine how effective your site is in turning visitors into customers.

SEARCH ENGINES AND DIRECTORIES

When you type a search term into a search engine, it returns a listing of hits for that term. The listing often contains thousands of entries. Most people only look through the first few pages. If your website shows up at the end of the listing, no one will find your site. The goal is to make sure that your site gets listed in the first page or so. Top ten ranking is excellent. Getting high ranking is what search engine positioning is all about.

Good search engine positioning is critical to your business' success on the Internet. No matter how good your website is, no matter how well it is designed, it is useless if no one ever sees it. You have to work closely with your designer to optimize your website to get the best search engine positioning.

HOW SEARCH ENGINES WORK

Each page of your website has a title, a description, a keyword list, and content. The description and keyword list are hidden from the casual user in the page code. When a site is submitted to a search engine, the engine looks at the title, the description, the keyword list, and the page contents to create a ranking for the page. The ranking is based on keyword density (how often certain words are used), keyword positioning (where the words appear) and keyword emphasis (how important the keywords are in the text).

Every search engine uses a slightly different method to evaluate pages. Some look only at page content. Others look at the title and the page content. Still others look at everything in the page and assign relative weights to each word depending on its location and use. As a result, it is extremely difficult to design a web page that gets top ranking in every search engine. Techniques that will help you gain good ranking in one search engine will lower your ranking with others.

And there's more...

Search engines are constantly changing the way they evaluate and rank web pages, making it nearly impossible to achieve top ranking with all search engines all the time. The real goal is to create a site that will rank well with most search engines most of the time.

HOW DIRECTORIES WORK

Along with the search engines, there are directories. Search engines are actually computer programs that patrol the Internet looking for sites to index.

What You Need To Know Before You Hire a Website Designer

Search Engines and Directories

Directories are different. In a directory, a human being reviews each site. Sites are grouped by category and are ranked within that category. The rules for ranking in directories are different than those used by search engines. To rank highly in a directory, you need to have useful content in your site. Well-placed keywords just won't do the job.

The reason for this is that directories want to provide highly relevant search results for their users. They maintain quality in their results by manually screening each submission to strict standards. Sites that are poorly designed or do not offer useful content are usually not listed. Yahoo, the most popular directory, provides the following list of common reasons for rejection. Most directories have similar criteria.

- The site has broken links or graphics.
- There is no new information or content (e.g., it is merely a set of links).
- It is difficult to understand what the site represents or what it offers.
- The site is no more than a business card listing (e.g., it contains nothing but a few sentences, an address, and a phone number).
- The site offers content readily available from other sources (no unique content).
- The site uses applets or other features that slow functionality and ease of use.
- The site looks amateurish.
- The site is unfinished.

There is no secret to getting listed by directories. If you have a well-designed site that is easy to navigate, provides useful and timely information to its users, and does not suffer from poor design problems or technical errors, it will probably get listed.

GETTING GOOD SEARCH ENGINE AND DIRECTORY POSITIONING

How the search engines and directories rank your site has a real effect on how many visitors you will get. If your site is ranked in the top five, it will pull many more visitors than if it is ranked in the next five. If it is ranked below 50, you will get little or no search engine traffic.

Again, the keys to getting high ranking are to target your customer market carefully, define relevant keywords, and provide clear and useful content for your users. This all goes back to the marketing aspect of your website. Developing keyword-rich copy that effectively promotes your organization is the secret to a successful website.

There are also features in the layout of your site that can improve your search engine ranking. Keywords, how they are emphasized, and where they are located on your web pages, can make a tremendous difference in your search engine positioning. Designing for search engine ranking is one of the things a good designer will do for you.

KEYWORD SELECTION

With the growth in the number of websites, getting high search engine rankings with single keywords is very difficult. You are much better off targeting keyword phrases. Keyword phrases are two or three word phrases that your target market is likely to use to search for your site. "Home Business" is better than "Business" and "Home Business Software" is better still.

The more targeted your keyword phrases are, the less competition you will face in search engines, the higher your ranking is likely to be, and the more effective your site will be in attracting its target market. Careful keyword selection is one of the secrets to a great website. Your site designer will work with you to select keyword phrases and will help you work these into your site effectively.

SUBMITTING TO SEARCH ENGINES

Once your site is online, the first thing to do is to submit your site to the search engines. Some will list your site for free. Others charge an annual fee.

Most free search engines have a "Submit New Site" link. Once you submit your site, they will index your site. This process can take anywhere from 24 hours to several weeks.

Some search engines charge to list websites and charge an annual fee to remain listed.

Other search engines don't have "Submit New Site" links anywhere on their site. This is because they search databases provided by other search engines. The relationship between search engines and database owners is complex and is constantly changing. Your designer should be aware of the best (and worst) places to submit your website so that you can get the best value for your money. You should expect to pay an annual renewal fee to keep your site listed in the search engine's database.

Be aware that paying to be listed by a search engine does not guarantee your website good ranking. The site will still be evaluated on its own merit.

SUBMITTING TO DIRECTORIES

Most directories charge to review your website. Unlike most paid search engines that will list your site once you have paid, paying a directory only guarantees a review. It does not guarantee that your site will be listed.

Most sites are accepted with no trouble, but if your site does not meet their requirements, they will not list it, nor will they refund your money. They will typically send you an email describing what they feel is wrong with your site and give you 30 days to revise and resubmit it. Once your site is listed, you will be charged an annual fee to remain in the directory.

PAY-FOR-POSITION SEARCH ENGINES

There is a class of search engines that will actually let you buy top ranking for your website. These pay-for-position (PFP) search engines charge by the “click.” Every time someone visits the PFP, does a search, and clicks on your link, you are charged a flat fee. The fees are set by the PFP and top ranking costs more than lower ranking.

Pay-for-position is a tool used most effectively by organizations that can target their market very specifically through keywords and that are assured of a high visitor-to-sales conversion at their website. It requires continuous investment and gets very expensive very quickly. If you are paying \$1.00 per visitor and you get 1,000 visitors a day from the PFP site, you need to get enough sales to cover the expense.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Good positioning in search engines and directories is essential to your website’s success on the Internet.
- Search engines use automated tools to evaluate websites. Directories evaluate them manually.
- The secret to getting a highly ranked website in both search engines and directories is to develop relevant, keyword-rich copy.

PROMOTING YOUR WEBSITE

Once you have a website, how do you get people to visit?

Registering with search engines is a good start, but it isn't enough. To get the best return on your investment, you should do everything you can to attract visitors to your new site.

The following methods are all good ways to encourage people to visit your site. Depending on your business and your implementation, some will be very effective; others will not work at all. The secret is to try them. And if one method doesn't work, it doesn't mean that you should give up on it. You may just need to refine your implementation.

Talk to your designer about promotion before the design starts to see if any of the following promotional tools need to be included in the design of your site.

REGISTER WITH SEARCH ENGINES AND DIRECTORIES

Your website is displayed on the Internet and many of your visitors will come from online searches. The best way to promote your website is to register it with the major search engines and directories.

USE BANNER ADS

Banner ads are the big, colorful ads that you see plastered all over a lot of the websites you visit. There is a lot of discussion as to whether they are effective or not. The companies that sell banner ads say that they are very effective. The people using banner ads don't always agree. On the whole, the click through rate of banner ads is about one half percent. This means that one out of every 200 people click on these ads.

But there are some secrets that you can use to make banner ads much more effective.

First, have your banner ad designed professionally by a marketing and advertising firm, not by a graphics shop. There are standard advertising techniques, colors, and buzz words that have been tested and proven by years of advertising research. Use them.

Second, place your banner ad on sites that already attract your target market. If you sell pet care services, place your banner on sites that sell pets or pet supplies, not on sites that sell automobiles.

Third, don't waste your time with banner exchanges. There are many services that will place your banners on their sites if you let them put their banners on yours. Don't do it. Most of their sites are not targeted to your market. Their banners may be inappropriate for your site, may advertise your competition, and offer your visitors a ticket out of your site.

EXCHANGE LINKS

Another good way to promote your site is to exchange links with other sites that complement your business. Text links or simple graphic links on related sites can bring you lots of well-targeted visitors. Select your link exchange partners carefully, choosing those that complement your business and attract your target market. You should also consider listing with trade and professional associations.

Having links on other sites has a side benefit. Some search engines use link popularity (how many sites link to your site) as a factor in determining ranking.

SEND OPT-IN EMAIL

When you visit a website that asks if you would like to receive more information about their organization, services and similar products, and you agree, you have "opted-in." You have said that you are interested in this type of information and you would like to receive more. Your name and any information you provided (email, questionnaire results, etc.) will be distributed to other suppliers of similar information. Soon you will begin to get email from similar businesses with similar products. That's OK though, because you said it was acceptable.

You can buy opt-in email lists or subscribe to opt-in email services that will send your advertising to interested customers. This is a legitimate means of advertising and can be very effective. But you should be careful where you get your opt-in email lists. Don't respond to unsolicited email offering opt-in lists. If they are sending unsolicited email to you, they are sending it to others.

ADVERTISE IN E-ZINES

E-zines are online periodicals – the Internet's equivalent of monthly magazine subscriptions. Some are free, some require paid subscriptions, but they survive mainly on advertising fees. Find some e-zines that cater to your target market, and advertise there. You can expose your website to hundreds or thousands of interested prospects at very reasonable rates.

START A NEWSLETTER

A very effective means of gathering and retaining clients is to create a newsletter. Every few weeks you can send out a newsletter with the latest information on technology, services, and information that relate to your business. You can also include information on your products, sales, etc. Since this is a requested subscription, it gives you a market of people interested in what you have to offer.

You can manage a small newsletter yourself or use a newsletter service to send your newsletter. The real key to a successful newsletter is to create useful and interesting content for your clients. Information on products and sales alone is not sufficient to maintain your subscriber base.

INCLUDE SIGNATURE LINKS IN EMAIL

Every email that you send should have your email address, your website address, and a business line in the signature. Almost all email tools will let you set up a signature file that will automatically append your signature to every email that you send. (Make sure your software actually includes the signature at the end of the e-mail; some programs treat them as attachments, which are an unwelcome nuisance and will not be seen.)

SET UP AN AFFILIATE PROGRAM

If your products have a high enough profit margin, an affiliate program may have a positive impact on your sales. Basically, what you do is pay other website owners a commission on sales or a fee for referrals. They advertise your products on their sites with no expense to you. When you sell, they get paid.

There are many businesses that sell affiliate tracking software and others that provide affiliate services to help you track your sales and commissions.

PARTICIPATE IN ONLINE DISCUSSION GROUPS

There are many online discussion groups and newsgroups. Find some that relate to your business and join. Sit back and watch for a while to get a feel for how they operate, then start to contribute. Don't use your contribution to sell your products and services or you will be kicked out. Instead, ask questions when you are new, answer questions and give advice after you have been there a while. You will find that other members will begin to visit your site and will contact you offline. Just be sure to include your email address and your website address as part of your signature in every submission.

INCLUDE YOUR WEBSITE ADDRESS ON YOUR STATIONARY

Put your website and email addresses everywhere you put your phone number. This includes company stationary, business cards, invoices, envelopes, advertisements, mailing labels, etc.

USE STANDARD ADVERTISING METHODS

There are a wide variety of places to advertise—magazines, newspapers, television, radio, etc. Always include your website and email addresses.

SEND DIRECT MAIL

Direct mail is an excellent promotion technique. You can send letters and fliers to your prospective clients through the mail. Be sure to include your email address and your website address on everything you send.

SUBMIT PRESS RELEASES

Press releases are a form of marketing that small businesses usually don't consider. If you have a newsworthy service, issue a press release. Getting a new website is hardly newsworthy, but if you can work it into a press release about your business, you will benefit. If your business isn't big enough to warrant national coverage, it may well interest your community newspaper.

USE PAY-FOR-POSITION SEARCH ENGINES

There are several Pay-For-Position search engines on the Internet. With these search engines, you can guarantee top ranking by outbidding your competition. You pay for your position in the search engine rankings and pay every time some one clicks on your link. These can be a very good advertising investment if you choose your bid keywords carefully.

TWO FATAL MISTAKES IN MARKETING ON THE INTERNET

There are two promotion techniques that will not promote your site well and may actually have negative effects on your business.

The first of these is bulk search engine submission. There are many organizations that will promise to submit your site to hundreds or even thousands of search engines for a low cost, or even for free (“...submit your site to 10,000 search engines...”).

Listing your site with these services will produce little or no traffic because almost no one uses them. What listing with these engines does is produce spam (junk email) in your mailbox. Many of the bulk submission services are no more than “email mines.” After you submit your website address, the website will be automatically scanned for email addresses. Any email addresses will then be sold to bulk email marketing firms. Within days of submitting, you will begin getting dozens, or even hundreds, of unsolicited emails every day.

The second technique to avoid is “spam.” This is sending unsolicited email to advertise your products and services. It is the “junk mail” of the Internet. Spam irritates a lot of people, and if a few of these people complain to your hosting service, you may find your site closed down – permanently.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Getting good search engine and directory ranking is the most effective way to promote your website.
- There are several Internet based advertising techniques available including banner ads, link exchanges, opt-in email, e-zines, and newsletters.
- Place your website address on all of your business correspondence and in all of your print advertising.
- Avoid bulk search engine submission services and bulk email (spam).

SUMMARY

Anyone can create a website. It's just a matter of buying some "do-it-yourself" software and putting some text and a few pictures on the Internet. Or at least that's what the companies that sell "do-it-yourself" software say. But if you visit the computer section in a book store, you will find shelf after shelf of books about effective website design, search engine positioning, and Internet marketing. These things aren't in the "do-it-yourself" box and they are essential if your website is to be effective.

If you simply want an Internet presence – a basic website that says, "We are here" – then designing your own site or getting a low cost package design are your best options. But if you want a website that ranks well in search engines, brings visitors to your organization, and produces a return on your investment, hire someone with the skills to create it.

Whether you are operating a private organization, a small business, or a home-based business, do some preparations before you contact a designer. Look at your organization and define specific goals for your site. Next, spend some time looking at other websites and develop some concept of what you want, and don't want, in your new site.

When you have enough information, contact a designer (or several if you wish) to discuss your needs and their ability to meet those needs. Base your final selection on your personal comfort level with the designer, samples of previous work, recommendations from previous customers, and getting the best value for your money.

While your website is being built, make sure that the technical aspects are addressed, but never lose sight of the fact that it is copy (text) in the site that determines whether it is successful or not.

If you finish this book and remember nothing else, remember this – **a successful website is one that ranks well in search engines and elicits the desired response from its visitors**, and the secret to a successful website is persuasive, keyword-rich copy. The layout, the colors, and the pictures are all very important, but the search engines and your visitors respond to the text.

Good luck with your venture onto the Internet.

Mark Frank
Apple Website Design
<http://www.AppleWebsiteDesign.com>



WEBSITE DESIGN WORKSHEET

Before you call a designer, take some time to fill out the following information. It will make your website design go much more smoothly.

Name of Your Organization:

Type of Organization:

What Does Your Business Do? (products, services, etc.)

Who Are Your Customers?

What Do Your Customers Need?

Goals For Your Website:

- Create revenue through direct sales.
- Communicate with customers and potential customers.
- Provide information and answer questions.
- Provide online services.
- Enhance your business image.
- Get increased exposure.
- Generate leads.
- Gather customer information.
- Display your products and services.
- Provide resources to the media so you can get free publicity.
- _____
- _____

What You Need To Know Before You Get a Website

The Main Purpose of Your Website:

Terms You Would Type Into a Search Engine to Find Similar Websites:

Addresses of Competitors' or Similar Websites (2 to 4):

Addresses of Websites That You Like and Why (2 to 4):

Addresses of Websites That You Don't Like and Why (2 to 4):

Themes or Colors You Would Like in Your Website:

Special Features You Might Want in Your Website:

Questions for Your Designer:
