Should my business be on the Web?

Am I getting the full potential out of my Web presence?

"Many small businesses are still missing out on a huge opportunity - and at a time when traditional retail is under increasing pressure."

Your Business Plan

There are few business truths more irritating than the one that says
"if you don't know where you are going, how will you get there?"

A web presence (or "e presence") must be considered as a part of the overall business plan, it must convey the correct image, it must be accurate and robust, easily changed and constantly marketed. It must fulfil its purpose without excessive "clicks", be cost effective and be able to respond to changes in taste and technology.

This report will guide you through the steps to evaluate your current (or future) web presence to ensure it is aligned to your business plan and that you understand the back office resources required to support your ambitions.

The investment you make in your e presence should be considered in the same way as any other sales, marketing or channel campaign.

The analysis should start with the basic question of what business I am in?
The e-presence strategy of a wedding venue business will be very different to a clothing store or a tyre manufacturer. The difference is not just size.

In most small businesses the challenge is in finding customers, so in almost all cases the web site functionality will be structured around selling or marketing the business.

The clothing store's strategy will depend on the market they are in. If they sell Levi jeans on-line the customer will have a very clear idea of what the product is and may therefore only buy on price. The structure of the site must be able to handle large numbers of customer returns for instance as apparently clothes sizes are notoriously unreliable. If the clothing store is a bespoke designer business then very high quality images and descriptions will be required to ensure understanding as well as a lot of web marketing to ensure site visibility is high.

In the case of the wedding venue it also became a "portal" for the specialist suppliers of the wedding sector to joint market, e.g. photographers, wedding cars, dress makers have reciprocal linking to their web sites to add value to the web visitor.

The entry costs of an e-presence can be low and in comparison to conventional advertising the response is more easily traceable. Your strategy must also take into account the changing habits of your customers and their increasing comfort and expectations of dealing and transacting on the web.

Growth in e commerce

By the time you have read this line another consumer has signed up for broadband in the UK. Each year 600,000 e savvy teenagers join the consumer market. The growth is staggering: a survey just published by Ofcom has found that Internet usage within UK households has increased 14 fold within the last 5 years. News of this remarkable increase in Internet usage comes on the back of a recent report that 1 in 10 credit card payments are now made online and that online shopping nearly doubled last Christmas. With indicators suggesting that this phenomenal growth will be repeated next Christmas and that within 5 years, **a quarter of all UK purchases will be conducted via the Internet,** it is becoming ever more important for retailers to have an effective presence online.

Another report from Actinic confirms that more small retailers than ever have a presence on the internet, which shows that a quarter of small and medium sized retail companies in the UK now have their own website, up from just seven per cent last year.

The study also found a five per cent increase to eight per cent in the number of businesses providing customers with a method of ordering and paying online.

Overall, however, the report reveals that retailers, even in the midst of the current slowdown in high street spending, lag behind other sectors in understanding the profitability of having a web presence.

The key point drawn out by this report is that there is still a long way to go before the percentage of businesses trading online comes anywhere near the percentage of consumers who are shopping online.

Also encouraging, however, is that 13 per cent of companies said they plan to launch a website in the future, while nearly a half of those already online are planning to expand their site.

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Your Web Site

The web we know and love is still less than 15 years old. Capabilities are evolving at an extraordinary pace; remember though that in the Web and on Web Sites doing seemingly difficult things can be really easy while unfortunately doing simple things can sometimes be really difficult.

There are three basic types of web site.

a. **Brochure site**

This is just like an advert. The content will usually be static with perhaps only two or three pages.

It is intended to provide simple information about products and services and probably your   location.

Benefits   simple low in cost to build and host. It will almost certainly be built from a template.

Downside   may not provide real value to consumer.

b. **Ecommerce site**

This covers a huge range of sizes from the simplest 10 items all on a single page to multi layer drill down menus with choice options for example colour or size in a clothing site. These sites almost always have on line payment and shipping capability.

Benefits   A Professional website will give you an e commerce presence.

Downside   Takes planning, and very risky without expert help.

c. **Intranet site**

This is a space on the web which is a private internet to a company or group. These have been used by large companies for a while but recent developments have made them cost effective for very small companies.

Benefits   all your data and information available to all your employees 24/7
In any way you want to present it to read write or edit.
Can contain public areas as well as definable access zones within the site.

Downside   just like a web site it must form part of an IT strategy for your
company or it will slow you down.

Structure and Specification

A web site should always start with a home page. This is where most visitors will
enter and where most external links will send you. As this is the first page that most
users will see when they visit your site you should devote considerable time and
energy to making sure that your home page makes a good first impression.

Thereafter the only limit is your imagination. If you want a low cost site (which
usually means your designer will be working from a template) there will be limits to
how many pages and levels you can have.

A basic rule of structure is that your customers should able to get to what they want
in *three clicks from the home page.*

Template or Bespoke?

The word template sounds pejorative but the reality is not the case. All a template
means is that your developer can reduce your costs because the framework is
already there. The ability to change the appearance i.e. background, colours, fonts,
font sizes and to some extent the structure is still available and there will be many
features that can still be bolted on (see features below).

Bespoke work is required when you want something that a template couldn't be
expected to do,

Examples of bespoke work are: integration of another system into the site
Flash or Animation writing
Advanced capabilities such as databases.

Specification

The developer should work with you to create a specification for the web site.

This process should be clear and documented. The more time spent here then the more accurate the quote will be and the developer should be able to guide and advise on the most effective features that will meet your needs. A successful web solution should be a long-term proposition that is carefully nurtured in order to maximise the available benefits. The diagram below shows the seven-stage lifecycle approach that has been developed and used very successfully by one of the UK's premier network of e-Business and IT consultancy service and solution providers.

This methodology ensures a superb design backed up with a set of services aimed at promoting the web solution and providing ongoing analysis to ensure that business objectives are being achieved. The cycle continues through a process of further consultation and enhancement to cater for changing business needs.

Look and Feel

Your website will be the first and sometimes only contact the consumer makes with your company. There is no excuse for spelling mistakes or functions that do not work. The internet is a great leveller in that small companies can compete head on with the large corporations but the flip side is that the consumer's expectations of the two web sites are often similar.

It is here that the subliminal messages of design and colour way will either support or clash with the consumer's expectations in your market.

There are Web compatible fonts that you can be assured will appear the same in the same font size in all browsers, going outside this list maybe "creative" but it increases risks of your site not displaying correctly.

Logos and images

The emergence of broadband gives the opportunity to increase the file sizes of photographs. The importance of the quality of the pictures of your products cannot be underestimated. But remember that large files will slow your site down. Typical logo size should be 175 pixel by 50 pixel.

A successful Web site does not happen by accident. To create a Web site people will visit and revisit certain basic principles should be borne in mind.

Make it look good. In your website you have to convey everything that your business is about and do it in a way that is attractive. If the layout is disorganized or the design is too busy or looks thrown together people will stay away. A well designed Web site draws people in.

Make it easy to move around. Think carefully about how your site is structured, does it make sense from a visitor's point of view and can they find what they need quickly?   Are there pages where a visitor can't find a link to get back into the main site?

Keep it current. Check your Web site frequently and ensure that the information is updated regularly. Out of date information turns visitors away.

Proofread the site before it is published. Spelling, grammar and typing errors will damage your image. Visitors will think that the information on your site is unreliable and that your business approach is sloppy.

Make sure there is something useful and relevant on very page. Don't have pages that are merely filler or just steps along the way to something useful.

View competitors web sites. Do this frequently and make sure that your site is unique and is keeping up with the rest of the competition on the web.

Have a Linking plan. Providing links to other pages and encouraging others to link to you is very important. Links make it easier for search engines to find your website. They can make the difference between being indexed by a search engine and not being indexed, they can also make the difference between being ranked well in a search engine and not be ranked.

Publicise it. Find as many ways as possible to promote your site. Few people will just land on your site through serendipity. Make sure your site is listed with the main Search Engines. Use Search Engine Optimization techniques to ensure that your site is constructed to be Search Engine friendly.

Do not be browser specific. Users can be using many different browsers or earlier versions of browsers. Test your pages in as many different browsers as possible.

Keep in mind hardware considerations.   Not all users will have the same configuration, say a 21 inch monitor and high-speed cable-modem. Many of your potential customers may be connecting the internet at 28.8 Kbps and peering at a 14 inch monitor but they still want to buy from you. If their hardware limitations mean that they cannot get to your site or cannot see it properly when they get there they will not buy.

Features

This is where the real power of the web site comes in. Your provider should have off the shelf " bolt ons" that will add functionality to your site

These could be:
A shopping cart facility
A feed back form
A site map
Flash animation
User ID and login
Chat room
Reservations capability
Site search

Search Engines and Marketing

As of 2005 over 50% of site visits began with search engines. Of the other 50% many of the visits will be repeat visits, the new visits i.e. new customers come through the search engines. Search engines are the single most important source of new visitors to web sites.

It is therefore very important that your site be optimized to win that much sought after high ranking with the Search Engines.

Successful sites tend to be clean, standards-compliant websites that load quickly, are content rich, and are frequently updated. Websites that follow the web's simpler conventions short and descriptive titles, easy navigation, no disabling of browser buttons, no technical errors, no duplicate pages tend to get higher rankings.

Here are some things that need to be done to ensure that your web site is found and rated by the major Search Engines.

Do a keyword analysis. Keywords are the words you expect prospective viewers would use to search for your site. These keywords should then be included in the text of your web page. You need to create pages that the Search engine spiders or bots can read (limit flash, replace images with text). You then need to put keywords into those pages and they need to be in the right place and the right format. Register with the search systems. Get other sites to link to your site. If at all possible these steps should be incorporated into the design phase and specification of the web site. It can be done after a site has been published but it is much harder to do and is less effective.

Use pay per click, this is a system by which you get ranked well but pay each time someone clicks a link to your site bypassing natural search entirely.

Make good use of web site statistics to help you improve your site. Site statistic software sits on the same Web server your web site files sit on. Every time someone interacts with your website the statistics software logs the transaction. A good server statistics package will tell you, among other things, when and how many hits each page has had (lets you know which are your popular pages, or if an ad campaign has stimulated traffic). It will also tell at which point the viewer exited your site. From this and other site stats you can identify weak areas and fix them and hopefully see your conversation rates from visits to sales improve.

Content Management

Your web site is often the first place customers learn about your business. Making the information on your site relevant, accurate and actionable is crucial. Placing the ability to update the information on your site in the hands of those who know it best is key. A good Contact Management System ensures that you can publish up-to-the minute news and information about your organisation

Costs

A very basic site, well hosted will cost about £250 for a year. All costs should be visible and clear. Ensure that each feature is costed and remember that you will need training to manage your own content (see section 9). The costs of bespoke work vary enormously. The harsh reality here is that a UK house will have difficulty competing with those that have offshore developers (mainly in the Indian sub continent).

Relationship

The web developer should spend time understanding your business, this can be built over a long period as you grow and your web needs grow with it. It can be very frustrating to have to move providers and start again when you find they cannot support your new initiatives

Urban Myths and Bad Ideas

"I can write you a web site for £25 and get hosting for £5 per year"
This is of course possible, but you will be undertaking all of the roles that even the smallest web company will assign to individual specialists – it's no surprise that most failed websites fall into this category.

"We know the tricks that will get you up the search engine rankings just pay me £250 up front"
There are no tricks. There is knowledge, good practise and marketing.

"The internet is a fad, it will pass"
The gas supply companies said that about electricity in the early 20th century.

"People have stopped buying over the net because of credit card fraud"
Fraud has been a part of the risks we take in business since a certain serpent and a certain apple.

"I really want to grab people's attention so let's use lots of bright colour and big flashing text"
Please don't unless you are selling skate boards to 12 year olds

Bad Ideas

Large video files or photos in the home page, have a skip option for flash intros to those people who still use dial-up – bless.

Trying to be something you are not. As consumers get more sophisticated they can spot the nuances and messages your site is sending. If there is any uncertainty they will click back to google and try somewhere else.

Publish and forget. If you don't care why should the customer see sections 8 and 9.

A visitor counter.   This used to be cool now it's tacky

Date it.   Why date it? Unless you have been on the net for 15 years age this will count against you

Date format.   Use 11th Mar 06 style, never 11/05/06 because this can mean 5th November to our American cousins

Internet Security

Scary Facts
On the internet you are one click away from 934 million people, not all of whom will be nice people with ethical principles. Large businesses have been spending a lot of money on internet security to protect themselves from internet fraud, so the Small and Medium sized Enterprise (SME) community are now the target of choice for e-crime.

So here are some scary facts for SMEs:

"Antivirus software alone is not enough to protect a business. SMEs are not patching their systems quickly enough and they are not using firewalls to protect their systems"   PricewaterhouseCoopers

"Recent Internet virus attacks have proved serious enough to force 22% of Europe's small businesses into closing down operations to recover, according to new research" NewBusiness.co.uk

The Chamber of Commerce's own studies show that 61% of businesses reported they have experienced one or more computer related crimes in the last year and 93% of firms have experienced a virus attack or irregular intrusion, British Chamber Commerce

Internet crime can be anything from a malicious virus which will destroy your hard drive or getting access to your bank account to something as simple as stealing your email address to pump out massive numbers of emails, it's no joke when your customers are bombarded by 500 emails per hour from your email address - this can seriously damage your reputation.

Human Nature

E-crime can threaten your business which makes it a strategic issue requiring awareness and vigilance across the business, driven from the top. Your IT manager or increasingly in SMEs your outsourced IT support will be an essential part of managing the risk, but it is vital that responsibility for it resides in the boardroom.

It is essential to acquire the best and most appropriate security but many of the worst internet threats rely on human nature to find an easy way in or by-pass the system. One of the most vulnerable points is the ineffective use of passwords. At one time it was rumoured that 30% of businesses in Manchester used 'beckham' as their password, and how easy to forget to remove logins once a temp or student has left the business with potentially disastrous consequences.

In a series of recent internet security seminars run by Spear 40% of business owners attending were not able to spot an identity stealing email trap which directed them to a spurious website where bank details would be captured. This devious and increasingly common crime route is referred to as phishing or pharming.

Technology is part of the answer

There are now a vast array of easily available Virus checkers and Firewall products which will both reduce the risk of unauthorised access to your system via the internet and spot most viruses. But some are better that others and businesses that are serious about managing the risks are increasingly utilising 2 security systems simultaneously. Even with 2 robust systems in place they still must be updated every day, which is usually a service included in the annual fee. There are also "patches" for Windows which should be downloaded regularly: these are developed and published free by Microsoft, to cover the gaps in Windows security as they are discovered. Firewall settings must be set up to maximise your protection and should be thought through and discussed with the installer. These protective systems are not expensive and offer enormous value considering the business critical nature of the data they are guarding.

If the worst happens

So you have superb firewalls and virus checkers – what will happen to protect your valuable data in case of fire or catastrophic computer breakdown? Unless you also have a rigorous backup routine which ensures that a full data backup is done every day and stored off site, you are running a serious risk. And what would happen if the backup got stolen? Business identity theft has been traced back to the loss of backup tapes. Even with physical back up there are problems: Tape backups can be slow and very few tape systems encrypt the data, while all magnetic media decay over time which means that a restore is not guaranteed. An on-line backup solution is far superior and very cost effective. It gives you full encryption, single click retrieval and does not require anyone to remember to" take the tape home ".

If you still think this is a lot of fuss about nothing, think again. The impact on the business of significant data loss is usually so great that companies rarely recover. DTI research found that '*75% of businesses that suffer a major data loss go out of business in 18 months"*.

But what about the workers

So as we've seen the best technology in the world is easily bypassed if your internal procedures are ignored or misunderstood by your employees. An integrated policy must address both the training and awareness of all staff in the use of the internet and the consequences to the business of data loss. And then there is always the issue of employees using the internet at lunch time to view inappropriate content. If you do not have a written policy prohibiting this and explaining the consequences, you will find it extremely difficult to take disciplinary action. Ultimately internet security and IT policy are strategic issues and the director's responsibility.

Training and Awareness

Information security is just like any other business issue, the way in which the project addresses the human element will determine its success and sustainability. There is a direct correlation between the amount of time spent on the training and the ultimate success of the project, the difficulty will be that often in SMEs there is insufficient expertise to structure or deliver the training.

ClunkClick

It is unlikely that legislation will ever emerge that will make it a crime when you do not keep your virus checker up to date but there is already an information security standard called EN ISO17799,   (similar in structure to the quality standard ISO9002). The MoD already requires an information security Management system that conforms to this standard for some of its suppliers and this will soon also be the case for supplying other government bodies.

The issue of internet security seems to have many parallels with the campaign to make wearing seat belts the norm back in the 1980s. You may remember the shock tactics of Public Information adverts featuring children passing through windscreens and the 'clunk click every trip' campaign. Just try driving without a seat belt now and see how unnerving it feels. Until we learn to 'clunk click every trip' when it comes to both the procedures and daily use of internet security, we can only be sure that many more SMEs will suffer from the business critical effects of e-crime.

History

1962
Paul Baran of the Rand corporation was commissioned by the U.S. air force to do a study on how it could maintain its control of the command over missiles and bombers after a nuclear attack.

The proposal he finalized was one called packet switching. The theory behind packet switching is still the basis of what we know as the Internet today. Packet switching is the breaking down of data into packets that are labelled to indicate a collection and a destination computer. These packets are sent from one computer to another computer until the information arrives at its final destination computer and is "reassembled". If any packets are lost the sender resends until it is complete. The packets can take any number of routes through the network (hence the name "web")

1968
The first network of minicomputers was set up linking UCLA Stanford university of California and the university of Utah. Packet switching successfully transferred data between the four computers.

1972
The first email was created and sent by Ray Tomlinson

1974
The word Internet was first used by Vint Cerf and Bob Kahn in a research paper on TCP/IP protocol. TCP/IP went on to become the standard for all Internet communication.

1976
Packet switching was first used on INTELSAT satellites that linked the USA to Europe

1980
Tim Berners-Lee wrote a program which provides links to be made between nodes on a network. Each node has a title and this has evolved into what we now know as hyperlinks or web–page navigation.

1983
DNS or Domain Name System is invented which begins the use or web site names instead of numbers.

1992
CERN in Geneva setup the WorldWideWeb.

1993
The first browsers are created.

1998
Microsoft declare the internet to be future of personal computing.