



Online Marketing on a Budget

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Even if people shop at real stores, they use the Web first to research products, find service providers or stores and get directions. Without a Web site, you miss out on this traffic.

But finding someone to design your Web site can be a challenge — especially when bids on the same specifications can range from \$500 to \$15,000 (and some of the worst sites cost the most to create).

Before thinking Web, think results. An online store isn't separate from your "real" business: It's your cyber storefront, and it's open for business all the time. Just as you wouldn't expect a great store on a back road to generate much business if you never mentioned it or visited it, you can't expect automatic sales just because you've opened an outlet on the Web.

The fundamentals of online and offline marketing are the same. You still need a plan, good products, great service and the ability to communicate all this to potential customers. Remember those e-commerce sites you've visited only to abandon your cart without buying anything? Or the marketing agency whose site was so creative you couldn't find out what they did or how to call them? You don't want to make the same mistakes.

Know your customers. Don't assume one size fits all. If you're marketing to women, don't assume that all women like pink and have children. Online marketing must be just as focused as offline marketing. In fact, the Web allows you to fine-tune your focus for a market that's much larger than the community where you're based. If you want to sell feather boas for dogs, the Web lets you do it.

Get a little technical. Rather than abdicate responsibility for your online-marketing success to a Web techie, make sure the site designer includes a content-management system (CMS) so you can manage your own content, including images and document uploads. If you can type and use Word, you can manage the content of your Web site. And the more you learn about Web technology the more empowered you are in negotiations with Web designers: You'll know what you're paying for and why. It's your business and your money, so don't be intimidated by technical talk. Tell the designer what you want visitors to do at your Web site and what results you want. Then ask them how the site will meet those specs. A true Web pro can tell you and will respect your commitment to your online office.

Keep it simple and keep it up. Studies repeatedly show that Web users value content in the form of properly formatted and written text over dazzling audio and video that's more cosmetic than functional. Unless you're in the entertainment business, features like Flash and embedded video can lose far more visitors than they attract.

A good Web site, like a good business, changes as it grows. After you've spent money to launch the site, expect to spend *at least* 30 percent of start-up costs for annual maintenance and upgrades. If you think you want a site "just like Amazon.com," remember, that site didn't happen overnight and it's constantly changing.

Measure, analyze, adapt. As management guru Peter Drucker has said, "If you don't measure it, you can't manage it." Make sure you've got a way to measure results on your site. (Google Analytics is one free tool.) Have you announced a new product? Did you get your name in the paper? Check out your site traffic to learn if the news had an impact. If you've got the data, you can adjust both your online and offline marketing for maximum effect.

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