

Five Common Misconceptions New Businesses Have About Websites

1. If we build it, they will come.

New businesses should get excited about the idea of creating a website for the potential that site gives them to reach the world and interact with it, but the misconception many have is that a website *automatically* means new customers. The biggest disappointment I see with new businesses is the lack of immediate effect their shiny new website has on sales.

It is true that once a site is published on the web, it is *available* for anyone to visit and most of the major search engines will eventually find you. Even if you make every effort to optimise your site for search engines (to the point of paying for guaranteed high rankings), only those people who are already looking for just your type of products or services with the right combination of search terms will find you. This helps, but it's not magic. You must actively and consistently advertise your site everywhere you can.

A website is an essential tool for your business that beefs up your sales potential, company image and communications, but it cannot spirit in new customers. It should be an important part of a strategic marketing campaign.

2. We need a website; let's hire a techie.

That a website is entirely an IT matter is a widespread misconception, existing across sectors and often perpetuated by IT professionals themselves. The world of IT is a largely technical world, consisting of networks, programming, security, bits and bytes and the like. While it is certainly true that the guts of a website are technical (in the same way that the guts of a person are biological) it is false to think that's the end of the matter.

A website can be a brochure, a shop, a meeting place, a journal, a photo gallery, a work of art, all these things and many more besides. IT techies can help you get the behind-the-scenes mechanics of the site working, but this is only one -- hidden -- aspect of the whole. You also need expertise in media, writing, graphics arts, communications, marketing, advertising and business strategy to get the balance right.

A good web design firm should have a combination of skills that complement those already in your company, but make sure before you commission them. If you plan to build the site yourself or just make sure you're going to a web designer with the right preparation, you could greatly benefit from a couple of hours with an internet strategy consultant ahead of time to point you in the right direction and ultimately save you money, time, frustration and lost business.

3. We need a website; let's hire my nephew.

It should go without saying that just because a teenage (or older) relative is good with computers, you should not hang your business's reputation for professionalism on his or her shoulders. But it doesn't go without saying.

A website is your public face: it should appropriately reflect the impression you want the entire world to get about the quality, character and values of your organisation. You'll only get the finish you deserve if you hire a professional with the relevant skills base. Find a web designer worthy of your company or use a DIY hosting service with good quality templates and features, and be sure you pay close attention to every detail. The same goes for all the content that goes into the site, including photos and graphics, which should be properly optimised for use on the web. Similarly, if you are not good with grammar and spelling, find someone to write or edit written content who is.

You only get one chance to make a good impression, and if the first sight visitors get about your business is an amateurish or sloppy website, they won't be back.

4. The more features the website has, the better it will be.

When faced with the decisions to design a new website, it can be tempting to agree to every feature, tool, bell and whistle on offer in the hope of building a richly interactive up-to-the-minute site. But remember that everything that goes into your site needs to have a well-defined business purpose to have the right effect.

In addition, most "extras" mean more work for you: blogs need frequent updating, forums need monitoring and facilitating, guestbooks need culling for spam, etc. Extras that get broken, out of date, overrun with spam or remain unused by visitors reflect badly on the professionalism of your company. All for no good purpose.

Start small with meaningful content and add things carefully as you grow. A simple, elegant website with clear organisation, appropriate content and careful attention to detail will always make a better impression than a messy site stuffed full of pointless features.

5. Web designers (or IT techies or my nephew) create websites.

I've heard it many times before: "Just build us a nice, professional looking website", and when I ask what they intend should go on the site, I get a blank stare. A website is just a package – *you* need to provide things to put in that package that have a real business purpose. In other words, you need to know why you want a site and be prepared to provide stuff to put in it: slogans, logos, advertising copy, product photos and descriptions, company history, news, articles, documents, whatever makes sense for your business.

The more (relevant) ideas, images and content you provide a talented web designer, the better able he or she will be to help you create a really good site that emerges organically from your needs and displays to best advantage the information, services and/or products that your business produces. Without this, at best, you'll get a competent generic, empty site that you will need to fill after the fact according to its strictures instead of your needs.

You create a website. Your web designer packages it for delivery.