



The “Brother-in-Law” Syndrome Applied to Websites

Components and Factors to Consider in Creating Your Business’ Website

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The Syndrome

This article could have been named “my neighbor down the street” syndrome or “my niece” syndrome. It’s really a “fill in the blank” syndrome that indicates a person’s response to the thought process for developing (or re-developing) a website for your company. This syndrome kicks in when your response is “Oh, my brother-in-law does websites, he can do one for our company”.

Have you uttered those words? Do you know of someone who has said that before? To an Internet or information technology professional, those words send shivers down their spine. Not only does this syndrome typically waste time and money, there is usually a sub-optimal business benefit realized.

So what do the words “does websites” really indicate? This article attempts to educate the business owner on the elements required to create a web presence that has business benefit to your company.

Components of an Online Presence

Does your brother-in-law understand the business drivers for your planned website? Were his first questions:

- Why do you need a website?
- What business goals do you want to accomplish with the website?

If not, this is an early indication that you have entered this syndrome. Having a business professional that understands how this technology can be used as a tool to enable your business is a key to success in the online world. Trusting your brother-in-law, who self-taught himself HTML coding, to enable your online presence is likely a mistake. Believing that you know enough to use your business skills to direct the “technology guy” is a sure sign that you have fallen deep into this syndrome.

Let’s explore the components of building and maintaining an online presence to educate you, so as to avoid these pitfalls, or to climb out of the technology “black hole” that you are currently in.

Website Design

There are two components to website design. To find an individual adequately skilled in both components is a treat. The first component to website design is the graphic design, which is the artistic piece. This individual needs to understand visual design, color schemes and design elements. He/she should understand the medium, i.e., the computer screen, where the design will be implemented, but doesn't necessarily need to understand the tools required to implement their design.

The second component of website design is taking the graphic design elements and creating website design artifacts that can be implemented into your website. This individual needs to understand monitor resolution, browser compatibility, image compression and cascading stylesheets, in order to take the graphic design elements and create something suitable for the website developer to use.

Simply put, the first component requires an artist, a right-brained person that thinks visually. The second component requires a more left-brained individual to translate the art into something workable for the Internet.

Website Functionality

At this point in the lifecycle, you should have your business requirements and a design. Now there are choices for implementing the concept into online reality.

Build vs. Buy vs. Subscribe

Traditionally, the process has been to research software packages in the market and decide if your requirements can be satisfied by an existing package (buy) or if your requirements are unique enough that you must create your own technology solution (build). There is now a third consideration. In addition to your research into software that you can purchase, you should look at software that you rent.

This “rent” or “subscribe” model can be called a “hosted solution” or an “application service provider” model, but the concept is the same, and it can provide advantages over the buy model. Typically there is nothing to install on your computer, ongoing enhancements are included in the subscription, and someone else ensures that the application is running and maintained. A stated disadvantage to this model is that there are recurring fees, although a cost-benefit analysis may show that adding the extra costs of the buy or build model tilts the advantage to the subscribe model.

Putting the Pieces Together

By this point in the lifecycle, you should have a website that meets the initial requirements for your business. Your website should have implemented the design that was created in the first step. If you've built or bought the application, you'll need to place it somewhere that visitors can access. This process is referred to as “website hosting” and involves placing your application, content and images on a server computer that is connected to the Internet. There are many choices for hosting your website: your website developer may offer this service, the company where you get your Internet access may offer hosting services, or you may choose a specialized website hosting services company. If you have chosen the “subscribe” model, website hosting is included, although the factors presented below should be consideration points when choosing the services provider in the previous step.

There are many factors to consider when choosing a website hosting company, and an adequate discussion on this topic is beyond the scope of this article. However, some of the major questions to ask potential website hosting providers include:

- **Availability:** What is the guaranteed availability percentage? What is the historical average availability? What is the network availability versus the web server availability guarantee/goal? Remember that a 99% availability level allows for over 7 hours of downtime a month, while 99.9% allows for only 40 minutes of downtime per month.
- **Bandwidth:** What is the bandwidth from the web servers to the Internet? How many hosted websites share that bandwidth? Note that this is different from the commonly quoted monthly bandwidth, which indicates the amount of traffic/data that can pass between your website and the Internet.
- **Data Center:** Are there adequate environmental controls over the data center where the web servers are located? Are there redundant electrical circuits, backup generators and redundant data communication lines? What are the physical controls to data center access?
- **Data Protection:** Are regular data backups performed? Is there real-time data redundancy? What controls exist for data stored off-site?
- **Technical Support:** Does the company provide technical support for all applications provided in the hosting package, or just for the server hardware? What options are available for after-hours support?

Marketing Your Website

Now you have a website that is up and running for visitors to view. How will your potential customers find your website? Your website should be a piece of your overall business marketing strategy. There are entire books written on this subject, and purchasing such a book is a good investment. The following are a few points to get started:

- Be sure to publicize your website on all your marketing materials. Remember that your actual product can be used to market future purchases. For example, a winery could print their website on the cork in each bottle of wine.
- If you anticipate that web search engines could be used to drive visitors to your website, then efforts are required to ensure that your web pages rank well within the search engine listings. This is not a quick process or a one-time effort, but requires experienced resources that understand this ever-changing process, and who can monitor the progress.
- There are many ways and places to market your website online. Again, a professional experienced in this subject should be retained.

Keeping Your Website Running

If you've progressed through the steps outlined thus far, your company has a functioning website that provides benefit to your business, and visitors are finding your website online. But are you done? Of course not, as with any business tool, a website requires regular updates to keep it in sync with the dynamics of your business.

A major factor to consider is the ease of making changes to your website content. These days, you shouldn't require assistance of a technical person to add a product or modify the description of your services. Such functionality, typically labeled a “Content Management System”, enables you to easily make changes to the website as needed.

Other Factors to Consider

In addition to the items already mentioned, you should consider the following factors:

- **Domain Names:** Your web developer may have registered your domain name(s) but you need to retain ownership of them as a business asset. Make sure you are listed as the administrative and billing contact on the registration, and make sure you have the login information to the account.
- **Copyright:** Sure it's your company's information on the website, but in many locales the web designer/developer owns the copyright by default. Make sure any services agreement grants your company the copyright to the website data.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to educate you on the components involved, and the factors to consider, in creating a website for your business. Hopefully, you now understand why your “brother-in-law” may not be the best person to undertake this assignment.

As a method of weeding through a list of potential web developers, I have a current favorite question to ask of each. It doesn't matter that you may not understand the question, the important thing is to watch their reaction and listen to their response.

Here's the question: In designing our database, how do you normalize the data from both a logical and physical perspective? If the web developer's answer is “huh?” or “5th normal form, of course”, just cross them off the list. Otherwise listen to their answer. A true Internet professional should be able to explain this concept in non-technical terms that you can understand, and more importantly, they should be able to explain why it matters to your business.

About the Author

Ron Kreutzer has over 25 years information technology (IT) experience, over 15 years IT project management experience, over 15 years Internet technology experience. Ron is President of WineWeb Enterprises, Inc. a company he founded in 1995 to provide an electronic marketplace for wine and Internet services to wineries and wine retailers. He has worked over eight years with a global information technology services provider, and previously was a Senior Manager with Deloitte & Touche Management Consulting (Deloitte Consulting) having spent over eight years on a variety of IT projects across many industries and technologies. Ron is a PMI-certified Project Management Professional (PMP) and a Certified Public Accountant (CPA-inactive).

About WineWeb Enterprises, Inc.

WineWeb Enterprises, Inc., founded in 1995, provides websites, e-commerce, wine club, content management, email campaign management, point-of-sale and customer relationship management services to wineries and wine merchants.

The WineWeb ® is also an e-Marketplace for wine. Visitors can find and buy wine online from participating wineries and wine retailers. We maintain a directory of over 35,000 wineries and over 200,000 wines available for sale. Our website averages over 2 million page views each month. Using our services allows you to participate in this marketplace.

For more information, please visit www.wineweb.com