

You Can't Hide From the Web Anymore

By Traci Matt
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It's hard for some of us to imagine that a mere half-century ago most American homes and businesses were not equipped with a telephone. Even more difficult to picture is the merchant who refused to embrace what seems in hindsight to be the inevitable march of technology.

"That newfangled telephone will never find a place in my shop," the nervous business owner must have mused. "Why would I want that bother and expense when my business is going fine the way it is? Besides, I just don't understand it. I'll leave that new technology to my kids and grandkids."

The common merchant of the mid-20th century couldn't fathom the impact

Internet or World Wide Web?

Internet: A decentralized, worldwide electronic communications network that connects computer networks and organizational computer facilities around the world. Information that travels over the Internet does so via a variety of languages known as protocols.

World Wide Web: A global system of linking documents, images, sounds and other files across the Internet. It is generally credited as the concept of researcher Tim Berners-Lee who developed the first practical system in 1989 at the European Laboratory for Particle Physics. The Web uses the HTTP protocol, only one of the languages spoken over the Internet, to transmit data.

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this marvel would have on the global economy—and his little world. Even the gifted entrepreneur who saw the first dollar signs behind telemarketing couldn't have known the influence that little wired box would have on our culture.

Today's businessmen and women are no different than our grandparents. Some have been eagerly anticipating the impact of the World Wide Web for years, some view it as a novel way to communicate with out-of-town family, and some are just plain scared to death of it and still believe it is a passing fad.

In December of last year, a Pew/Internet & American Life Project poll reported that 70 percent of Americans (141 million people) said they use the Internet; 91 percent said they have used a search engine and 41 percent said they use search engines on a daily basis.

The savvy business owner can't ignore those numbers, which represent potential sales, dollars in the bank, convenient

communication, and opportunities to educate the public and reinforce rebuilders' reputations as electrical experts.

"If your goal is to build your business, being on the Internet is imperative," said Carol Kuhn, business manager at Kuhn's Equipment Repair, an antique tractor restoration and repair shop located in Oxford, N.Y. "Your customers are spending countless hours on the Internet just looking for something to do, learn or just investigate. These can be your customers and they do not even know it."

Kuhn's current site has been operational for two years (www.antiquetractorsrus.com). Their first attempt was a "free" Web site that didn't produce satisfactory results because it didn't include proper coding for search engines. Today, if you type "antique tractor parts New York" in a search engine, Kuhn's comes right to the top.

"I knew that would be the hardest part of building the site," she said. "I



www.antiquetractorsrus.com

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decided to build this site in-house, because I wanted total control, and felt I would not have that if I went to a professional. I had purchased many things on the Internet and knew what I liked about my buying experiences.”

Kuhn began by taking a class in Web site design at a local adult learning center, and “read and researched anything and everything about building and marketing” that she could find. She then hired walking buddy Sharon Bickford to build the site using her design.

The result has been new customers from the local area and across the country for both services and sales. Although it has taken almost a year for their parts sales to “really take off” it has begun meeting their expectations as well.

After spending countless hours developing their site, Kuhn offers the following advice: “I am always hesitant about getting outside help, afraid of losing that personal touch to the Web site. But if you do not have any time to put toward a Web site and are happy with a cookie cutter look, then you should have a professional build your site. Know your target audience and cater to their wants and abilities with a computer. Make it simple with not a lot of flash. Have a site that they can explore, and keep them coming back by giving them new things to look at and read every so often.”

It's Cost Effective

The costs for development and maintenance of a site vary widely, as they do with any communications medium. The mystique of site expense basically boils down to four areas:

Initial Development and Launch Expense—This represents the man-hours someone will put in to determine what goes where, write and place text, design and place graphics, and program the computer to link everything together. Costs on this range from nothing, if you have an eager high school kid who wants the experience, to thousands of dollars if you go to a high profile Web design company. For the most part this is a one time expense.

Domain Name Purchase—In order to have your page come up when someone types in “www.yourcompany.com,” you have to purchase the rights to that uniform resource locator (URL), or Web address. Most names start at around \$30 annually, and the price drops as you take a longer commitment.

Web Hosting—The host is the physical place where the information for your site is stored. Most hosting services charge around \$10 to \$15 a month.

Maintenance—You cannot put up a site and simply leave it there. More man-hours need to be logged in responding to e-mails, updating information, and monitoring the site for bugs.

Recently the Electrical Rebuilder's Association (ERA) has added Web design and hosting to their repertoire of member services. ERA Web Site Director Wes Grueninger said they have developed a complete package which makes it easy for anyone to start generating business through a Web site. Their pre-determined price of \$400 makes it easier for rebuilders to take that first step (www.electricalrebuilders.org).

“You can hire a college kid, but they don't know the rebuilding business, they don't know the lingo. We try to de-jargonize it and make it so the sites are easier for the public to understand. The difference is whether or not you're going to get professional results,” said Grueninger.

The key feature Grueninger offers is efficient marketing—the very thing which eluded Kuhn with her first site.

“The very first listing in any Google search page is a highly coveted spot and there are many companies whose sole purpose is to tweak Web sites to obtain this result. They charge very large fees. We do it economically through a simple, well designed site with key words coded to bring our sites to the top of a search results page,” said Grueninger.

Once Grueninger receives all the information, the site can be up in a week. When the process is finished the site copyright is turned over to the rebuilder—a perk not all Web site development companies offer. The annual hosting cost is then \$100 to \$120.

His latest project was a site designed for Guy's Electric Service in South Windsor, Conn. (www.guyselectric.era01.com).

Guy's Co-owner Ken Plourde said he started by looking at other rebuilding industry sites. Then he gathered information for the ERA packet which took him step-by-step through the process to gather all Grueninger needed.

Plourde said they decided to take the plunge when they realized how many of their fleet and commercial accounts

were using the Web.

“We're finding that a lot of our customers are out there searching the Net for units and prices for units. I never thought some of my customers would be out there but they are,” said Plourde.

Grueninger's first ERA site was for Bob Thomas, owner of B&H Electric in Orange Park, Fla. (www.electricbob.com). Thomas said his search engine results are so good that he is picking up local business from the site.

“I think most rebuilders are missing out because they think the Internet has no local value. They think the Internet is only good if you want to sell products nationwide or worldwide,” he said. “Most potential customers are using it, and if rebuilders are not, they are missing out.”

Thomas has dropped all of his phone book ads (at one time an expense of more than \$500 a month) and pays around \$200 a year for his Web site. This strategy has also changed the makeup of the average phone call he fields.

“I do not get nearly as many calls from people looking for the lowest price or free help over the phone, which take up my time. The calls I do get are from more knowledgeable people who have been to our Web site, already know all about our business and have a map to get here. They have already been sold on our service by the Web site,” he said.

All in the Family

Kevin Sexton, owner of EBS Auto Electric in Clearwater, Fla., is fortunate enough to have a family member who knows both the rebuilding business and Web design (www.ebsautoelectric.com). His son Tyler designed their site “from start to finish” in 2006 and continues to maintain it long-distance as he attends medical school. This keeps Sexton's cost down to \$400 a year for a long-term domain name and hosting package.

“It is cost effective,” said Sexton. “My expectations were even if I got only 200 hits a year it would be worth it. I am consistently getting over 100 a month and sometimes more. It mainly allows for a larger audience to know what you are offering, especially in the local market. It allows for the consumer who is looking for local numbers to call for quotes to fix something and to realize there is someone close in their community to provide the top-notch service they deserve.”

Their site is also designed to appear at the top of a Google search when keywords which coincide with their location and expertise are entered.

Jeff Greenberg, vice president of Certified Auto Electric in Bedford, Ohio, is another rebuilder with a Web-talented family (www.certifiedautoelectric.com). His cousin and brother are helping keep his costs down as they design a new site. Even as the design is in process, they maintain a one-page site with basic product and contact information. His office manager still fields questions and processes orders initiated from the temporary site and from their sales on eBay.

"I would say to fellow rebuilders if you have a specialty product that local people are buying, then people worldwide will buy it," said Greenberg.

Henry Henke, owner of United Starter and Alternator in Lowell, Ind., has used a Web site for about five years (www.unitedstarter.com). It has generated local and international sales, and as a bonus, gives him a chance to facilitate goodwill for rebuilding.

"I think the money there is well spent at this time," said Henke. "I do get a lot of phone calls. Even the ones that don't turn into business for me usually end up being a referral for another shop, or at least some advice, and that is good for the industry."

Eight Simple Rules for a Results-Driven Web Site

1. You have mere seconds to catch—and keep—a Web reader's attention. Flashy, slow-loading graphics are much less effective than well-written text or a striking logo on a homepage.
2. Hire a professional writer. Your secretary is not a professional writer. Accurate, complete, dynamic text without typos or colloquialisms will lend credibility to your operation.
3. Take a cue from newspapers and use the 10-20-30 yardstick for journalism writing: big words = 10 percent or less; sentences = 20 words or less; and paragraph = 30 words or less. Less is usually better. You may lose a reader who has to scroll down a page to find what he or she is looking for.
4. Include background information about you and your company. The more legitimacy you can provide the more likely you are to have an inquiry or sale from a Web surfer. This is especially important if you do online sales.
5. Unlike a brochure or any other sort of print ad, the Web site has unlimited space to sell, educate, tell your story and tout your industry. Use it to its full potential but provide the reader with a site map or index if your site consists of more than a few pages.
6. It's not worth having a site if no one can find it. Make the effort to ensure your design will bring you to the top of a search engine. Use relevant keywords, including things like brand names that you service and your ZIP code.
7. Respond to e-mail inquiries on a daily basis. Web surfers are real customers with real money to spend and should expect an immediate response to their e-mails. You wouldn't wait to check phone messages once or twice a week; treat electronic customers with the same respect.
8. Remember the Web is a fluid advertising medium. Include a "last updated" message to let customers know they are reading current information. Don't leave outdated coupons or specials on the site. Mark your calendar and periodically check every page of the site—test all internal and external links, update text, and make changes to keep regular surfers coming back for more.