



Top Ten Tips for Creating an Effective Website

In today's marketplace, a business's website is often the first point of contact for new customers. While poor design invariably drives prospects away, a professionally designed and managed site communicates that your company is well run and successful, giving new customers the confidence to do business with you. Your website is a key component of your overall marketing mix; it must advance your business strategy.

Your company website must effectively communicate through words and images your vision, purpose, products, and services. It must make it easy for customers to get the information they need and buy the products they want. It must provide actionable performance measures. Your website has to work for your customers and for you. To create an effective high-performance site, follow these top 10 best practices:

1. Choose a domain name

A domain name is a unique Internet address for your website such as www.homestead.com. Choose an easy-to-pronounce, easy-to-spell name that reflects your unique business. Obviously, if your company is already established, you will want to register that name; however, many common words and terms are already in use. Alternately, you can choose a domain name that contains key words that will appear on your site. This will help potential customers find your site when they search on those words in search engines such as Google.com. To find out if a domain name is currently registered, go to <http://www.internic.net/whois.html>. If the name you want is taken, be creative rather than literal. Try free association of concepts. Bounce your ideas off an associate. Keep trying until you have a name that is effective and available.

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2. Plan your site

What is the purpose of your website? What do you want to achieve with your site? Establish your goals and priorities. Do you want to share information about your company, products, and services? Influence and motivate potential customers to visit your brick-and-mortar location or call your phone number? Brand your company and refine its image? Sell online? Provide customer service? Or some combination of the above? How you answer these questions will guide the design and development of your site.

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3. Create a budget

The cost of creating a website depends in large part on the purpose of the site. The other key factors are high quality and high performance. There is no point spending any amount of money on a website that presents an amateurish image and does not function properly. Although a general rule may be that the larger your investment, the greater your return, there is no need to be a spendthrift. Creating a website can be less expensive if you do it . . . yourself, but only if you have the time, inclination, and tools to do a good job. Otherwise, obtain bids from highly recommended designers and developers. Clearly define your goals, style, and expectations for these experienced professionals. After you have an acceptable bid, add in promotion and advertising expenses. As your company grows, you can expand your site, spreading your investment over time.

4. Gather information

Take a look at some of your competitors' websites. What information do you find most useful or compelling? Which design styles do you prefer? Which writing styles appeal to you?

Make sure your site contains plenty of useful information — not just advertising. Give prospective and returning customers the information they need to decide to visit your business or purchase your products and services.

Most websites benefit from having the following pages:

- About us
 - Products and Services
 - Order form
 - Contact or Feedback
 - Frequently asked questions and answers
 - News and Events
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5. Design your site

You've heard the saying, "one picture is worth a thousand words," but have you really thought about it? In fact, graphic design can communicate just as much, if not more, as the words on your website regarding your business. Your homepage has to capture the attention of visitors, drawing them into your site. The page design and navigation have to be clear and direct to keep them there.

- **Get attention!**

Use your home page like a piece of direct mail. Quickly grab visitors' attention. Tell them who you are and what they will find on your site.

- **Make it easy to find information**

Site navigation plays a big role in determining the "stickiness" of your site (how long visitors stay and explore). Typically, the first thing visitors do on any page is read the content and then look around for other pages that might interest them. Put the substance of your site at the highest navigation levels; don't make potential customers drill down through multiple layers of links.

- **Keep it clean**

A clean layout that uses a lot of white space improves legibility and encourages visitors to read the content on your website. Keep the number of fonts, font styles, and colors to a minimum. Use animation sparingly. The focus should be on the content, not on the whiz-bang technology. An abundance of fonts, styles, colors, and animation will only project an amateurish image. Your business as well as your website will be judged initially on its appearance.

6. Optimize load time

Customers today are in a hurry. They want information fast and won't wait more than 10 seconds for a webpage to download. Optimize your website for any web browser by designing each page to be under 40k in size. Use graphics, Flash animations, and scripts only as needed because they increase file size. Design pages for easy viewing on a typical 15-inch computer monitor.

7. Interact with your customers

The big idea behind most websites is to build ongoing relationships with customers to assure repeat business. To that end, list your phone number or email address on every page of your website so customers can contact you with questions and comments. You also may want to create a registration page that gives prospects and customers the option of receiving news and special offers from your company. Finally, it is imperative that you explain your privacy policy on your website.

8. Maintain your site

Your website requires ongoing maintenance to perform optimally and profitably. Update content and improve functionality by incorporating visitors' feedback. Keep them coming back for more with fresh information and new features. On a regular basis, perform these maintenance tasks:

- Check the links on your site to make sure they are working.
 - Respond to and act on visitors' feedback.
 - Update your site frequently (almost daily) if you put a "last updated" date on your web pages. An "update" date displayed at the bottom of each page assures your visitors that they are getting the very latest information. If pages are not updated frequently, these dates make your site look stale.
 - Monitor time-sensitive information. For example, do not leave event information on your site after the event date.
 - Periodically add new information. Many sites accomplish this by publishing a monthly newsletter or daily or weekly tips.
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9. Promote your site

The best website in the world does no good if no one knows about it. Effectively marketing your site is just as important as professionally designing your site when it comes to success. Here are a few basic ideas for marketing your site:

- Include your website address on all of your marketing materials, including your business card, email signature file, letterhead, print advertising, brochures, flyers, coupons, and signage. You can even put your web address on a company vehicle with a bumper sticker or custom paint job.
 - Advertise your site. Update your entries in directories and on search engines. Take advantage of opportunities to cross-link with other sites. If appropriate, participate in relevant newsgroups and forums — not blatantly advertising or promoting, but responding to postings — with your site address in your signature file.
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10. Save time and money by working with Homestead to create, promote, and maintain a successful website.

We can help you with all aspects of your site:

- Register your domain
- Provide 24x7 hosting reliability to ensure that your site is always available to your customers
- Provide easy-to-use tools to help you quickly build an effective website
- Offer professional design services at an affordable price
- Build your online store to sell directly to your customers
- Drive visitors to your website with affordable and effective search-engine advertising
- Provide friendly, helpful phone support

Visit www.homestead.com or contact 1-800-710-1998 to discuss your online needs with an experienced website consultant. Ask about our 30-day free trial offer. There's no obligation to buy; just satisfaction guaranteed. Build your business online today!

About Homestead Technologies

Building Online Business

At Homestead Technologies, we understand small business because we started small, worked hard, and built a successful company ourselves. For nearly 10 years, we have helped millions of entrepreneurs like you expand their operations to the Internet. Whether you need a promotional website that drives customers to your brick-and-mortar business or an online store that adds to your existing sales channels, Homestead can help.

Working with us is the fastest, easiest way to create a professional and affordable business site. Our full service solutions include award-winning design and development tools, search-engine advertising, ecommerce capabilities, complete design services, along with our friendly, expert support empower you to create and maintain your own website. You have complete control to grow your business.

With Homestead, you can be confident that creating your company's website will be a positive experience with a profitable impact on your business. We are a values-oriented company with well-established policies and programs that foster the success of our customers, employees, families, and communities. Our work has been recognized by leading publications, including Forbes, The New York Times, PC Magazine, The Wall Street Journal, and WashingtonPost.com. From our senior managers to our summer interns, we are dedicated to helping your business grow.

To get to know us better, please visit our website at www.homestead.com or call us at 1-800-710-1998.