

What needs to be considered when developing and launching a first website?

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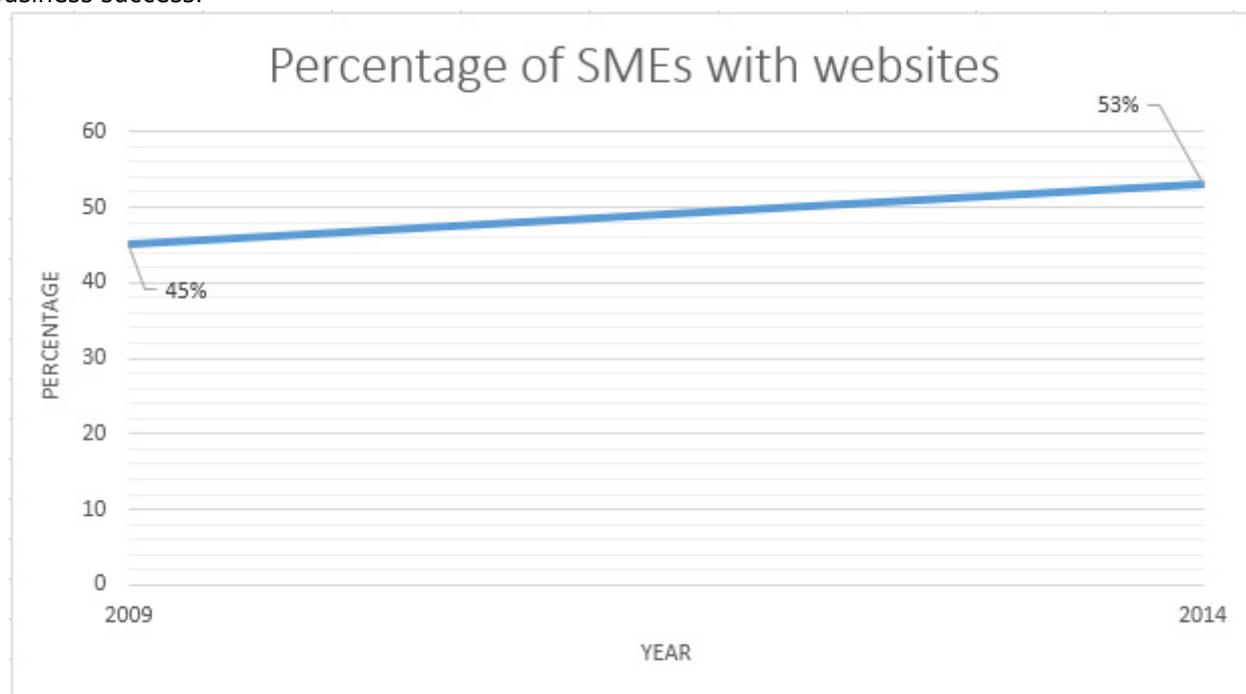
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What needs to be considered when developing and launching a first website? by Chris Tomlinson

Introduction

The world of small and medium enterprise (SME) is highly competitive and very high stakes. In fact, up to 80% of small businesses will fail within the first year and a half of opening their doors (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/ericwagner/2013/09/12/five-reasons-8-out-of-10-businesses-fail/>). No place is this competition felt more acutely than online, where it is easy for a business to be lost in a sea of constant competitors. There was a time when web development was a concern solely for larger businesses, but today an online presence is practically a necessity for an enterprise of any size, regardless of industry or customer demographic. When a potential customer wants to research a business, whether it is a multinational corporation or a mom and pop operation, the first place they will turn for information is online. If your company does not have a good online presence, it may be perceived as a lack of professionalism and an unwillingness (or inability) to use modern technology.

Despite this, the US Census Bureau (<http://www.statisticbrain.com/small-business-website-statistics/>) found that only 53% of small businesses had a website. This means that there is still a lot of uncharted territory for SMEs online, and subsequently huge upside potential. The margin is closing quickly, though. The popularity of small business websites has already risen from 45% in 2009, and of the 47% of small business without a website in 2014, 13% planned on developing one. Universal business web presence is clearly more than a passing fad or a luxury of corporate business, it's a cornerstone of small and medium business success.



Developing a website isn't a simple job. If not done properly, it could end up being costly and a waste of resources. That is why it is so crucial to take a methodical and well thought out approach to web development. For an SME, every dollar matters, so there is no money to waste on a website that is ineffective at adding tangible value. The returns are there, though, and if you are able to effectively equip

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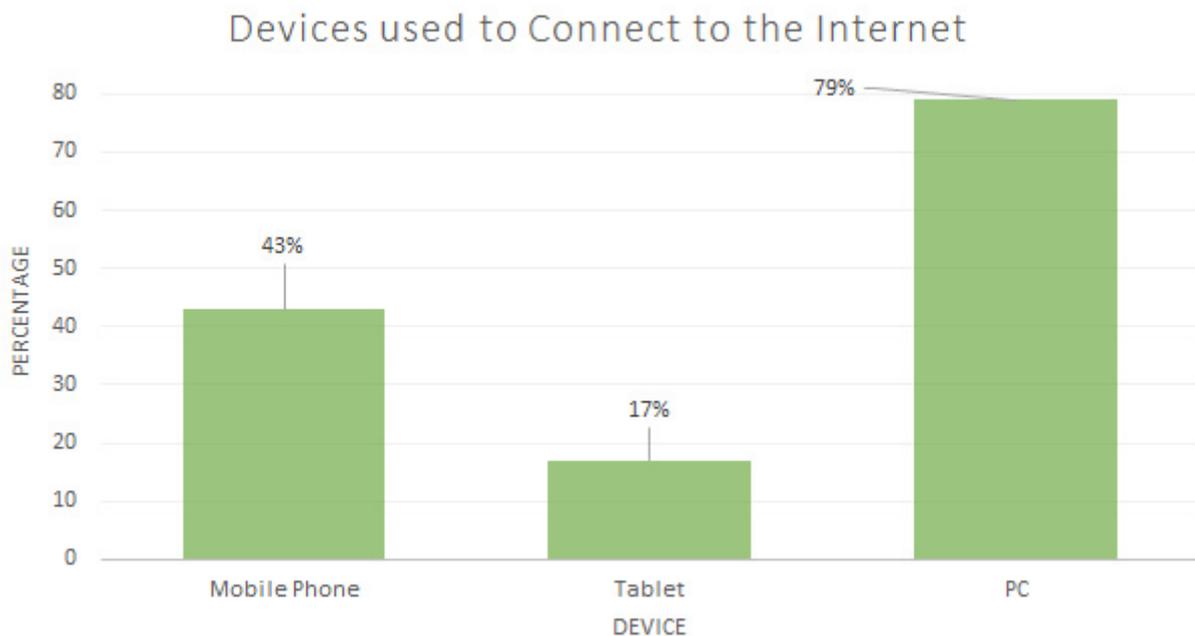
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your website, your business stands to reach customers far beyond its normal scope. Whether you are planning an exclusively online business, a brick and mortar presence, or a mixture of both worlds, your website is a key factor in your business' success. For an online business, the need for a stellar website is obvious, but it's also important for businesses who operate on a local scale to maintain a website. A recent study (<http://www.smallbusinesssem.com/two-more-studies-confirm-people-research-online-buy-locally/2901/>) found that 97% of consumers use the internet to research products or services in their local area. This means that even if your small or medium enterprise doesn't plan to drive revenue through ecommerce, your website can still have a huge impact on your sales. Developing a website is a big investment, but it's a worthwhile one. Keeping this in mind, the following will guide you through the principals of web development for the small or medium business.

Development and Infrastructure

The most important part of any website is the functionality. It won't matter how attractive your website or how interesting your content is if users aren't able to effectively access it. It's for this reason that your first step in web development should be focused on how your site operates; its usability and accessibility.

Optimizing for universal access.



In a 2013 survey of US consumers (<http://www.emarketer.com/Article/How-Do-Internet-Users-Divvy-Up-Their-Desktop-Mobile-Web-Time/1009841>), The Media Behavior Institute found that over 43% of internet users used a mobile phone to connect, while 17% used a tablet. 79% still used a traditional PC, but the use of mobile devices is definitely on the rise. Mobile devices come in an astoundingly wide variety of different types, including differences in their operating systems and browsers. These rapidly changing and varied specifics make optimizing your website for mobile use a bit of a challenge. Whether you are working with a developer or building your site in-house, make sure you develop a mobile solution. It's important to test your website on a variety of

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different devices to ensure that your mobile users can have the same access as traditional PC users. The differences don't stop at devices, though. There are a variety of different browsers for both PCs and mobile devices, and each has its own particulars. It's certainly not impossible to create a website that is accessible to a vast majority of different devices and browsers, but it does take a dedicated effort.

Determining Keywords

As many as 92% of adult internet users use search engines (<http://searchenginewatch.com/article/2101282/Who-Uses-Search-Engines-92-of-Adult-U.S.-Internet-Users-Study>). This means that an overwhelming amount of your website's traffic is going to come via online search. With so many competing websites on a relatively level playing field, it's easy for your website to get lost in the crowd. Search engines often have complicated algorithms for determining how likely your webpage is to show up when users do relevant searches, and these algorithms change frequently. The good news, however, is that you don't need to be an SEO expert to make a well optimized page. As long as you understand a few basic principles of search engine optimization, design your website around those key pillars, and work with people who can implement an SEO-friendly design effectively, you will be ahead of the pack. One of the first things you will need to do is to determine keywords.

Keywords should be words and short phrases that you want associated with your business' website. The ultimate goal is for your site to appear when potential customers search for these terms in search engines. Make a list of some keywords - likely no more than 10, at most - that you think will fit your business' services and target demographic. It may be helpful for you to research our competitors' websites to get a sense of exactly which words to use. Pay close attention to their content; what relevant words or phrases do you see repeated most often? You may have specific keywords that apply only to certain pages on your site, but your main focus should be on a core set of keywords that you can include throughout your website as a whole.

You may also wish to include these keywords as Meta Tags, which are a part of your website's source code and were designed to make it easier for web crawlers to index your website. In modern updates to search algorithms, however, Meta Tags and Meta Descriptions are far less important than keywords to your site's visibility. It still can't hurt to add your core keywords as Meta Tags. Google may not utilize them, but it's important to remember that not all of your traffic will be coming from the same search engine. Once you've determined your keywords, all that's left is implementation, which will be covered in depth when we discuss content development.

Selecting a Web Host

Your web host is of vital importance, since they will serve as the gatekeeper for your business' website, and will ultimately be the platform through which you develop and update your website. The first step is to determine a budget. Some web hosting packages include very comprehensive offerings, such as design and development help, a suite of URL-specific email addresses, and 24/7 customer service. These plans can get pricey. Other web host packages can be as bare bones as just the URL with no frills attached, which can run as low as just a dollar or two per year. Finding your budget for web hosting will help you realize where on the spectrum of services you can afford to go. There are small, local web hosts in almost every market, if you require a personal touch. Alternatively, large, global services can offer you cost savings in many cases. If you are working with design and development professionals - or if you yourself are no slouch in the web development department - then you can easily get away with a stripped down

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web hosting package. However, if you expect a lot of support and guidance throughout the process, then you may want to research more comprehensive web hosting platforms, including those that offer templates and walk-throughs to get you started.

No matter how many add-ons you get with your web host, what will be most important is finding a reputable, reliable company to handle your website. Your customers don't want to come to your page, only to find an error message. If that happens you can't be certain that they'll come back again. Make sure that you research a web host before ultimately selecting them. Look at user reviews on independent websites, ask questions and utilize customer service to get a feel for their responsiveness and helpfulness, and don't just jump on the first - or cheapest - web host you find.

Ensuring Security

When it comes to doing business online these days, security is at the front of many consumer's minds. There have been some major news stories over the past couple of years involving companies (even big name, corporate companies with world-class websites) becoming the victims of data breaches. Security is especially critical if your business plans to conduct any ecommerce, since that involves the exchange of very sensitive customer data, such as credit card numbers. Even if you aren't planning on doing any online business, it's still important to take the right security measures. Your business loses credibility if, say, a company email address is compromised and sends out SPAM to everyone in your inbox. Not only that, but some anti-virus browsing programs could flag your site as unsafe if the right precautions aren't taken, making people wary of visiting. It's important that you work with someone who understands security and can help you implement appropriate measures, such as encrypting any personal information you collect from customers - even something as innocuous as email addresses. Creating a Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) connection is one of the first steps you should take if you want security to be a priority. This isn't a daunting task, but does require some prior knowledge or research to complete.

Security shouldn't just stop at the website, however. You should ensure the protection of any device that will be viewing, processing, or storing company information. From the PC that you use at work to the home laptop you check work email on in the evening, make sure you have comprehensive virus protection. Your small to medium sized business may not be a huge target for hackers of the Russian organized crime ilk, but there are always threats to security when it comes to the transfer of information online. Take steps to make sure you're protected now so that you won't have to do the work to repair damaged credibility and trust later.

Design and Content

The next layer of web development is the design and the content of the website. This is the "meat" of your company's website and will be the part that your customers notice first and foremost. While development and infrastructure are key to your website's functionality, the design and the content are going to be what drives sales - or what drives potential customers away.

Creating an Attractive Design

2001 has come and gone. So, too, should the gaudy flashing .gifs and scrolling banner text be gone from your website. Your design should stay out of its own way, avoiding over-crowding and dizzying displays of color and motion. The way your website looks may not make or break your business, but it will serve as

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the “first impression” that many customers will have of your company. Sophistication and consistency should be paramount. Choose fonts and colors that blend well together and don’t fight with one another. For example, light text on a brightly colored background is going to be difficult to read, and as a result visitors to your website are likely to skip over the content, no matter how good it is. If your website uses different color schemes and layouts on each page, it will seem like you didn’t put much thought or planning into your website, so strive for consistency. Keeping your design fairly simple will not only look appealing, it should also make it easier for you to optimize your site for different platforms, such as mobile. Design may not be the most critical element of your small business’ web presence, but it is an important factor to your Customer experience. Keep aesthetics in mind as you develop your website.

Navigation and User Experience

Most of us have experienced the frustration of a difficult to use website or a broken navigation link. When your customers encounter problems like this, they probably won’t stay for long, and they won’t be likely to return either. Aside from just ensuring that all links, content, and indexed pages are accessible and working properly, there are a number of ways to make your user experience more enjoyable. Simple and thoughtful things, such as making sure that external links open in a new tab instead of navigating away from your website, make it easy for users to explore your website.

Having problems on your site, such as broken links, appears sloppy, so make sure you double check the functionality throughout the site before you go live and continue to regularly make sure that things are running smoothly.

Content Best Practices

Content is one of the most critical pieces of your business website. It is through your web content that you will primarily communicate with potential clients and customers online, so you shouldn’t simply rush through and slap together a few words for the sake of getting your business online. Instead, your content should be well thought out and follow industry best practices. This includes providing value adds for your clients and customers by making at least some of the content generally useful and informational, instead of focusing entirely on sales or promotion. By doing this, you set yourself and your business up as subject matter experts in the minds of your customers and you give them a reason to come back.

Your content is actually responsible for driving traffic to your website in a big way. As discussed earlier, search engines will likely be the origin for a large amount of your website’s traffic, and the keywords you determined will play a big part in how successful you are at gaining visibility through search engines. Optimizing your content for search engines isn’t terribly difficult, but it does require an ability to write in a concise way. Take the keywords you determined earlier and make sure to work them into your content wherever appropriate. The more times you can reference those terms and words, the higher your website is likely to rank when potential customers search for them. However, you should avoid “keyword stuffing,” which is considered a blackhat SEO practice and can actually have a negative impact on your ranking. There is a balance between keywords stuffing – which essentially means using keywords where they don’t make sense or *ad nauseam* – and peppering in a healthy dose of relevant terms to ensure search engine visibility. At the end of the day, you must keep in mind that your content is primarily for the users of your website. Nobody wants to read keyword stuffed, incoherent writing, so keep your content engaging and informational.

It should go without saying that your content should be well written and grammatically correct. Featuring

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typos or informal writing is another quick way to appear sloppy and unprofessional. However, if your content is crafted correctly, it can be a great way to get your message directly to potential customers. Your content should contain a call to action, meaning that you should convey a clear next step for your newly converted customers. They should leave your site knowing just how to do business with you, whether that leads to an ecommerce platform or info on your business' physical address and hours of operation. It is also highly recommended that you refresh your content often. You don't have to constantly update every page on your website, but from time to time it is helpful to make adjustments and keep your content looking fresh. Adding regularly updated features, such as blogs or promotions, is a good way to draw customers back to your website regularly.

Marketing and Advertising

Every business is different, so the amount of money and time you have to dedicate to business development initiatives can vary - especially as a SME. Depending on your business, marketing and advertisement could make up a big chunk of your annual spend, or it could be just a small percentage. Whatever your budgetary constraints and whatever role you need marketing and advertisement to play in your business, your website - and subsequently your bottom line - can benefit from a dedicated online marketing plan.

Conducting Market Research

To get the most bang for your buck, it's important to know which strategies are going to be effective when it comes to creating a marketing or advertising campaign. You'll have to get a bit analytical for this phase, but doing so will make your strategy much more effective. Find out as much about your customers as you can and figure out where your dollars are coming from to ensure that you are directing your marketing at the right people. If it turns out a huge portion of your sales are from women, it won't be as effective to gear your marketing material towards men, for instance. Conducting online research for statistics, demographics, and economic indicators of your local area or niche market can prove helpful as well. There are firms and industry experts who can conduct this market research for you, or you can get an idea of it on your own; it all depends on what your budget is and how comprehensive of a marketing strategy you are planning to employ. Either way, it will pay off in the long run to roll up your sleeves and get the research done. It certainly beats the alternative of taking the shotgun approach and seeing what sticks and what fails, potentially wasting money and man hours.

Advertising Methods

You can choose to promote your business and website via a variety of online advertising methods. Pay per Click (PPC) advertisement is one strategy that makes it easy to scale for small or medium businesses. Also known as Cost per Click (CPC), this form of advertising is appealing because the amount you pay is directly related to how much success you have in driving traffic. As the name suggests, PPC advertising means that you pay only for the number of times your advertisement link is followed. Popular PPC platforms, such as Google AdWords, allow you to set a monthly budget, ensuring that you never break the bank. Online advertisement may also come in the form of promotions or online specials. Websites such as Groupon.com and LivingSocial.com allow businesses to run promotions and make sales directly through their ecommerce platform, making it easy for SMEs to reach new customers, either locally or globally. Alternatively, you may choose to run and advertise your own online specials and promotions.

Collecting information on how you are performing is equally as important as conducting market research.

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One of the best and most accurate ways to find out how your campaigns are working is to conduct Voice of Customer (VOC) research. VOC is the process of finding out the opinions of your clients or customers and it can be done through a wide range of survey and VOC platforms. It's not just revenue that tells the story of your business' success, your customer feedback can make the difference between your business being a flash in the pan or a long standing institution. No matter how great your products or services are, if the customer experience isn't being managed correctly, your sales will suffer.

Social media is the space where marketing and advertisement meets VOC. Utilizing social media allows your business to interact with customers on a much more personal level. Customers are comfortable using these platforms already, making it even easier for them to provide you with feedback, ask questions, and seek out more information about doing business with you. It also serves as a great place to advertise and promote. You may choose to run a free business page, or you may even have dedicated dollars set aside for ad campaigns on social media websites, such as Facebook or LinkedIn. There are no shortage of social media sites, however, and it can be impossible for a SME to dedicate the time and energy needed to maintain more than a couple of accounts. The easiest way to trim the fat from your social media campaign is to determine where your customers actually are. You can do this through conducting market research and listening to VOC feedback, as well as simply observing where your business is gaining the most interaction and engagement - not to mention measuring the return on investment in actual dollars. If you find you aren't getting much impact at all from Twitter, you might want to instead shift your attention to Instagram or Trip Advisor, for example. In a small to medium sized business, where hours are often just as important as dollars, choosing a few social media networks to focus on instead of trying to maintain a large number of accounts can mean the difference between having an effective social media campaign and being stretched too thin.

Maintenance and Upkeep

Building your website is the hardest part, but the process doesn't stop once you go live. Your website won't be entirely self-sustaining no matter what, with constant advancements changing consumer behaviors online. There will always be advancements that will need to be accounted for in updates to keep your site functional and accessible to everyone. In order for your website to be truly successful, you should strive to keep it updated and refreshed with some frequency. It will prove incredibly helpful if you streamline that process and make it an easy task when the time comes.

Ensuring Easy Updates

The first thing you should keep in mind when it comes to maintenance and upkeep is the ease of making changes to the website. If you're working with a developer, make sure you communicate how the updating process will go. Keep the information you will need, such as user names and passwords, handy, so that if you need to gain access into any of your accounts for an update, you don't spend most of your time tracking down log in information. If you would like to handle some or all of the upkeep yourself, make sure you have the software necessary to achieve the task. If you're a veteran developer who can code seamlessly in Notepad, then you shouldn't have much to worry about. However, for most of us the preference would be for user friendly software that makes it easy to make an update, whether that means a minor change in content or a total overhaul. You will inevitably make changes to your website out of necessity, but you should ideally plan to give your site some time and attention with frequency. The easier you make it for yourself to accomplish that, the more likely you will be to actually complete the task.

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Pushing Out Content

As important as it is to update your content with some frequency, it won't mean much if your customers don't know about it. As you add new content or features to your website, make sure to let your customers know through as many channels as you can. Make sure to post links to new content on whichever social media platforms you utilize for your business and encourage your customers to check back frequently. Depending on your business, you might even do this the "old fashioned" way, by inviting your current customers to visit you online and letting them know when new features are added. The goal is to use your website to drive business, but you can also use your business to drive customers to your website, hopefully keeping you on the top of their minds. Not all of the content you push out needs to be directly related to your website, however. You can share any interesting or useful content with your customers – provided it doesn't link to any competitors and it is appropriate for your audience and to your business.

Tracking Analytics

Since so much time and effort goes into building and maintaining a website, so it's no wonder that you want to make sure it continues to thrive. The best way to monitor the health of your website is through measuring and tracking analytics. Even free platforms like Google Analytics give you access to a wealth of information about who is viewing your website, including details on location, gender, and even other interests of your visitors. That information can prove invaluable when it comes to targeting new campaigns and better understanding how to serve your clients and customers. Most analytics tools make it easy to break information down into helpful and customizable categories. It's now possible to see not only how many views your website got, but also how individual pages got more hits and how long visitors stayed on each. This makes it incredibly easy to measure the success of specific campaigns or just measure the health and performance of your website over time. Monitoring which pages are performing better than others could help you refine your strategy and make your website more engaging for your customers.

Summary

As you can see, there is an awful lot that goes into building and maintaining a website for a business. Careful thought should be put into the process at every step, but it can be an investment that returns, connecting you to potential customers that you may never have had a connection with otherwise – both in your neighborhood as well as globally. With so many moving parts at play in a typical business site, it can be tough to get everything in balance. That's why your focus should be from the ground up, starting first with the infrastructure of your website. Your website should be secure and fully optimized for a variety of devices and browsers, and you should be sure to use an appropriate web host. At this stage, the focus is on planning, such as determining the keywords that will become the backbone of your content.

The design of your webpage translates into the user experience your customers will have, so it's important to make your website attractive and simple to use. Your content should be both interesting to your website's visitors and optimized to attract traffic through search engines. Your business' online presence can also play a large part in your marketing and advertisement strategy at all phases, from conducting initial market research to gathering customer feedback. Which specific strategies you choose to employ will depend on the needs of your business, your budget, and your goals, but there are certainly options that can accommodate the needs of most SMEs. Equally as important as the development of your business is the upkeep and maintenance. With so much time and thought invested into your online strategy, it's worth it to develop a maintenance routine to ensure that your website continues to benefit

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from your thoughtful planning and methodical approach. Making your customers aware of what they can find on your website, including new content and features as you develop them.

Putting the effort into building and maintaining your website may take a fair amount of time and can prove to be a cost source, but if it's done correctly your website can really be a boon for your business. Keeping ease of use and customer experience in mind will draw potential customers to your business, and whether you do business with them online or in person, a small business can easily benefit from the connection to new customers and the potential to reach people where they are already spending time: online.

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Peppersack is a leading digital marketing agency providing SEO and content marketing services that deliver results. Our search engine optimisation services will help to raise your page rank. We deliver proven results in the form of traffic to websites and sales inquiries through integrated inbound marketing campaigns. We make it easy for your potential clients to find you. These services are based on a disciplined approach to research, analysis, business planning and reporting. Support services include content development, social media management and creative design and development.

Contact Peppersack

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