



The 10 deadly sins for small businesses online

Author: Deborah Whitman

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So, you're ready to bring your small business to the Internet. It's time to create your online presence — your Web address, your corporate e-mail address, your business Web site; in other words, your marketing face in the online world.

Lots of businesses have walked this path already. Here are 10 common mistakes many companies have made, but that you can avoid.

1. **No-name nobody's:** Many small businesses choose to set up shop in the online world with a Web site name or URL on Geocities, Angelfire, Tripod or MSN, rather than having their own Web address. Which company would you feel more comfortable buying from — www.members.tripod.com/loudinismagicshop or www.loudini.com? (The latter is a real Web site, specializing in magic accessories.) I don't think I'm the only online shopper who feels reassured by "real" business Web addresses. I've recently bought several gifts from an online company with a "no name" URL, and I'm wondering if the products will really arrive. A strong, easily recognized Web address is affordable for even the smallest business.

The same is true for e-mail addresses. If you are running a small business, it's a great idea to set up an e-mail address that uses your business Web address. When you send messages to potential clients, to your bank or to suppliers, joesmith@coffeespark.com (not a real site) looks far more professional than joesmith@aol.com. Bypass deadly sin No. 1: Make your Web presence a professional one by finding a good Web address for your business and using it for both your Web site and business e-mail.

2. **Pokey pages:** Many small-business Web sites load far too slowly. I've checked out small-business Web sites that have taken so long to load that my computer froze for more than five minutes. Most sites aren't *that* bad, but if your Web pages take more than 10 seconds to load over a 28.8K modem, you run the risk of losing visitors to your site. Photos and graphics with large file sizes are usually the culprits when a page loads slowly. Use Photoshop or OptiView to reduce the file size of individual graphics and photos on your Web site to no more than 10K.
3. **Picture paucity:** You wouldn't send out a marketing brochure that's all words and no pictures. So why do so many companies create Web pages without graphics or photos of any sort? If a single picture paints a thousand words, use a judicious number of them on your Web site to communicate volumes. Photos of your store or office, your products, your employees — these images make your business feel "real" to online visitors. Images give you a tangible presence and let visitors get a sense of the kind of business you run. Harrell Remodeling, in Menlo Park, Calif., uses high-quality photos of actual projects and of the business team to convey a clear image.

Mind you, using pictures doesn't contradict deadly sin No. 2. It's important to use photos on your site, but it's equally important that the file sizes are small enough to load quickly on your Web page. The other key is to use only high-quality photos, which often requires a professional photographer. Again, you wouldn't send out a marketing brochure filled with cheesy photos, would you? Because it's likely to be seen by many more people than most paper brochures, your Web site should be the best marketing brochure your business has



ever created.

4. **The "if I build it, they will come" delusion:** One of the most common mistakes small businesses make is to assume that if there's a business Web site, customers will suddenly start flocking to it. Don't wait to start marketing your firm online. As soon as you are happy with your Web site, get going with the basics of online marketing. I recommend at least five marketing efforts when you launch a Web site. You can tell how strongly I feel about each of these marketing efforts because I've devoted an entire column (or two) to nearly each one. Using these five steps, you can set up an online marketing effort that will help ensure that customers come to visit the awesome new Web site you just built.
- ❑ Be proactive in listing on search engines.
 - ❑ Start an affiliate program to encourage and reward other businesses for sending you online customers.
 - ❑ Be proactive in finding sites with which you can trade links.
 - ❑ Consider joining a banner exchange like bCentral's Banner Network or SmartAge's SmartClicks.
 - ❑ Start collecting visitors' e-mail addresses on Day One, so that you can lure them back to your Web site.
5. **Phoneless in cyberspace:** Don't forget to put your phone number *prominently* on your Web site. Many small-business executives have said the way their Web site is most frequently used is a customer looking at it while calling the company. Customers will refer to something on the Web site, but they actually buy products or order services on the phone.

Unless you are working out of your home, it's also a good idea to put your mailing address on the site. It adds to the comfort level of knowing you are a "real" business.

6. **Barrage of banners:** Joining a banner exchange can help bring traffic to your Web site, but putting two, three or four banners on a page, along with buttons for Amazon, Netscape and five or six other affiliate programs just makes your site look busy and cheap. You'd never find a large-company Web site with multiple banners on a page (OK, don't send me examples . . . I'm sure *some* big company makes this mistake, but don't follow the lead).

If you join affiliate programs such as Amazon.com's, you'll probably find that you get much better results if you provide links to specific products in context, rather than a generic button to those companies' home pages. For example, if you run a Web site selling Raggedy Ann dolls, why not show a selection of books about the history of rag dolls and link to Amazon.com so that customers can buy them? You actually get a larger percentage of the sale from Amazon this way. And you provide a service that makes sense for your business, rather than another distracting button on your Web site.

7. **Disappearing acts:** I am floored by how many small-business Web sites are here today, gone tomorrow, and back again next Tuesday. It's been a real issue for me as I write these columns. More than once I've had my editors drop me a note asking why they can't find a particular small business's Web site, when I've visited the site only days earlier. It may sound obvious to say that it's incredibly important that your Web site is up and running when customers go looking for it, but the disappearing act is a mistake that many small businesses make.

How to make sure your site is up? Either assign an employee to check the site several times a



day, or use a service that will notify you if your site goes down.

8. **Antique information:** You'll want to keep the information on your Web site current. I've seen small businesses that have forgotten to update phone numbers, showed daily specials that were months old or offered online coupons that expired weeks earlier. You've got to maintain your Web site to keep it current. Make sure someone on your staff is responsible for the Web site's information and checks and updates it routinely.
9. **Background noise:** For some reason, many small-business Web sites use busy background wallpaper. You'll find gray embossed company logos, wild patterns and other distracting background designs on many small-business sites. People think the designs add interest and panache to the sites, but all it does is interfere with the messages. Stick with a basic color for the site background, one that is consistent with your site's image. A white background doesn't have to be boring.
10. **You do what?:** The final deadly sin is to have a Web site that doesn't quickly convey the kind of business you are in and the products and services you offer to customers. Sounds like another no-brainer, but you'd be surprised at how many small business Web sites leave you looking at them for minutes while pondering, "What do these folks *do*?"

The front or home page of your Web site should include a short statement of your business mission. Consider augmenting that statement with a photo or graphic that makes it clear what you do. One site that does this well, despite offering a service that's not familiar to many of us, is Brown Plumbing. The front page tells you that Brown Plumbing repairs pipes, and if you don't completely get it, the next few pages offer clear graphics about *how* they repair pipes.