



Does your business really need a Website?

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I've heard many small-business owners say they think they "should" get a Website. They're not quite sure what they will do with it, but they've been told they should have one.

In most cases, they're right. A Website can be an important marketing tool for almost every small business.

If you have as many customers as your business can handle and you have no desire to grow larger (as with our handyman), then there's no point in marketing on the Web.

Alternately, if you are really certain that potential customers won't use the Internet to find your product or service, then you can safely skip the Web. One example might be a convenience store, where drive-by awareness literally drives all customer traffic. For most businesses, that assumption is getting tougher to make, at least in the United States, where 158 million people have Internet access.

Usually, a big "yes"!

There's no question that a Website is more mission-critical for some businesses than others. Companies trying to reach customers in different locations (think hotels or tourist attractions) or who have products that can be shipped to customers far away (think flowers, handmade dolls, telephones, etc.) obviously need to have an online presence.

But local businesses (dry cleaners or shoe repair shops, for example) also can benefit from a Website that shows their location, lists their services or offers special promotions.

And woe to those who think they don't need a compelling Website because they serve other businesses rather than retail consumers. Many businesses search for new suppliers online — and order from them that way, too.

In short, if you want more customers, you should be online, regardless of your industry.

Your online marketing tool

For most small businesses, a Website is rapidly becoming a basic requirement of a marketing plan. A site can help you reach one or more of the following goals:

- Help customers find you in the offline world — your office, your storefront, your phone number.
- Persuade customers that you have the right service or product for them.
- Sell products online, even across different marketplaces, to retail customers or other businesses.
- Share relevant business information and special offers with customers.

Read on for some tips on how your Website can deliver on those goals, and for a look at some small-business Websites that really work.



A website helps customers find you

The simplest possible Web presence tells people how to find your business in the "real" world. It should include:

- A good Web address that relates to your company name.
- Your business address, complete with directions and a good map.
- Your business phone number, along with fax numbers if relevant.
- Hours of operation.
- A clear and enticing description of what your business offers to customers.

This simple Web presence is most appropriate for businesses that serve local customers (a dry cleaner, doctor's office or plumber, for example) *and* that aren't actively looking to expand their customer base (as with a fully booked dental practice).

For better marketing, create an expansive site

If you're interested in active marketing for your business, you can expand your Website to make it a more robust online marketing tool.

In this scenario, the Website's job is to convince customers to take that next step: Buy the product online, call you to place an order or set up an appointment, or drive to your office or storefront. Your site is essentially your online marketing brochure, one that's more effective than a printed marketing piece. Websites enable customers to dig deep into the information they care about, without overwhelming them with the stuff they don't want or need to know. That's hard to pull off in a paper brochure.

You can approach crafting the Website as you would any other marketing brochure. Use color, graphics, photos and words to get across four key things about your business:

- What you provide for customers.
- What kind of customers you focus on and can serve best.
- How your business is unique from others who provide the same product or service, so customers can decide if your solution is the right one for them.
- The personality or brand essence of your business — what your company stands for.

Unless you have all the customers you can handle, a Website can be a good marketing investment. Find a domain name that's appropriate for your business and beef up your marketing arsenal with a compelling Website.