

How to Start a Successful Web Design Business

Introduction

I started building websites back in the mid 1990's when the technology first became available. I bought my first PC at Sears, a Packard Bell for \$3000, which was a princely sum back in those days. It was an MS-DOS system with memory and speed that would be embarrassingly archaic in this day and age. But it was a start and a great learning experience, dealing with a couple of ancient e-mail systems and rudimentary bulletin boards that were THE method of communication prior to web pages. Believe it or not, selling anything on the web back then was a HUGE taboo! Can you imagine that?

I was probably one of the first in my town to have Internet access when it became available via the squawky old phone modems. I also had a sideline business selling collectibles at toy fairs and sci-fi conventions on the weekends. Despite rubbing shoulders with the cast of Star Trek, etc., it soon became a tiresome activity, even though it was good money at first. There had to be an easier way and this new Internet thing looked certainly looked like the solution!

Finding a way around the bulletin boards and a tricky way to advertise my toys and collectibles online soon became a driving obsession. HTML was the answer to building visual web pages and the ticket to covertly selling online. Thus I got started with e-mail marketing by sending a printed "catalog" to people I connected with in the online bulletin boards and very basic web pages. Eventually, hand coding HTML became much easier when the first Windows web editing software became available. Computers started getting cheaper and it wasn't long before people started asking me to build websites for them too.

First page Rankings in Yahoo!

Back then, almost every website I built, easily landed first page results in Yahoo (which was the Google of that era). Keywords were all you needed and in terms of SEO, it was the wild west, no holds barred and anything goes. Soon thereafter you could even SELL things on the world wide web. Wow...what a concept! One of the first companies I built a small e-commerce application for landed top ranking all over Yahoo, AltaVista and the other search engines. They raked in 3/4 of million in online sales in the first year, after I moved them into the newly available Yahoo Store. I think I made \$500. Arggh!

"People keep coming in and saying that **they saw me on the web...**"

This story is just too crazy to be true, but I swear to God, it's TRUE! I built a small website for a local business. Like most of my other sites at the time, it landed in the first page ranks of a Yahoo search. People came into the business and proudly proclaimed to the owner, "*we saw you on the web...*", which was a big thing back then, when people started getting on to the

Internet. But, the business owner asked me to pull down his website and stop it. WHY???

Because he didn't own a computer and couldn't see the website. He said that it made him nervous that people kept coming into his store and mentioning that they saw him on Yahoo. Though I explained to him that this was a *good thing*, he insisted the website come down. "After all," he said, "it's not like I can see this webby thing. It's not like my ad on TV that I can see every week!"

These days, people beg me for help getting first page rankings in Google or pay tons of money to try and achieve it. Go figure!

Getting Started



Starting any type of business can be challenging. Before you do so, it's vitally important to do your homework, research and plan out your business goals.

Creating a web design business is much more than simply building websites. You need to create a plan to provide high quality design along with excellent customer service to your clients. In a nutshell, you need to establish yourself as an expert authority that your clients can contact for any of their web related needs. Obviously, that means that you should either have experience or hire people who do. You should have at least a basic knowledge of web and graphic design, copy writing and organizational skills. You should also be well grounded in how search engines work and the part that social media plays, when implementing a web project.

Tools and Software

Do you have the proper hardware and software in place?

- Powerful PC and/or Mac with large or dual monitors. Get something with a fast processor and plenty of RAM. Do not skimp on your choice of a computer and buy the best you can afford. You will truly appreciate this later. Tip: I use a PC and two large digital monitors. It allows me to work much faster and using only one monitor would be like having one hand tied behind my back.
- **Adobe Creative Suite**. Particularly Dreamweaver, Photoshop, Illustrator and Fireworks. Photoshop is still the best for images but I do find that Fireworks is better and quicker to work with for more web related tasks.
- **Firebug** is a must have browser add-on for working with CSS stylesheets
- Although Dreamweaver offers built-in FTP capabilities, you should get a separate FTP utility. There are many available on the web for both PC and Macs that are free.
- Text editors such as Notepad or better yet Notepad++. These are particularly useful when you need to quickly edit a WordPress file or open and view a MySQL database.
- **Flash Renamer**. Clients will sometimes provide a folder full of images, fresh from a digital camera, etc. A batch image name replacer will save you a lot of time.
- Screen capture tool. **Snagit** and **Camtasia** are commercial tool but I save the Snipping Tool as a shortcut on my PC as a quick method of grabbing a screen capture to save or quickly insert into an email to a client.
- **WinZip, WinRar** and other file compression utilities are a must. If your computer does not already have one available, there are many available on the web that are free or cost very little.
- Backup with an external drive or an online service such as **Carbonite**, etc.

Getting the Business Rolling

Do you have references from past projects that you created either personally or professionally? If not, you do need to create something that showcases your work. Perhaps a pro bono website for a local charitable organization or a friend's business. Testimonials will also help establish credibility and authority. In any case, before you approach a potential client be prepared with examples of your work and possibly a few good recommendations. *LinkedIn* is a great place to showcase your past projects and gather recommendations.

Working with Clients

At the heart and core of your web design business is working with clients. Your success will mainly depend upon how well you satisfy your client's demands and how responsive you are to their issues. A great web design means nothing if you do not provide excellent customer service. Also, great customer service translates into quality referrals, which is a win-win situation.

Listen to what the client wants and take notes.

Only after you determine what the client needs can you start to provide solutions. Nobody wants to hear a long winded speech about you and your company so keep it to a minimum. They want you to concentrate on their needs and desires, not yours.

Who are your “ideal clients”?

What makes them pleasant to work with, efficient and reliable? Perhaps it's a niche group such as medical professionals, real estate agencies or construction companies. As you become more of an authority within a niche profession, you can provide better customer service and advice than your competition who works with a broader customer base.

The client is NOT always right!

Despite the saying that “customer is always right”, you will often find that is an invitation to disaster. My own personal motto is, I would rather work with people who “don't know what they are doing” as opposed to those who “THINK they know what they are doing”. Nothing will bog down a web project faster than the armchair quarterback who read a couple articles in 1997 and now thinks he knows everything about the web. He will insist that you load up the keywords meta tag, add a ton of non-relevant links but will then ask you later on why Google is not ranking him on the first page of search results.

You need to educate these type of clients immediately or in the worst case scenario, walk away from the project. Believe me, whether or not you have a contract in force, this type of client will suck the energy out of you and will micro-manage you into a state of depression. Some will be willing to take a step back and agree with reason but others will take a more stubborn approach. You should always have a good rapport with your client and they should trust you enough to work with you, not against you. Good clients make for a good business all around. Use this as a mantra.

Protecting Yourself Legally

Always use work proposals and contracts. Not only does a professional contract protect you, it also protects your client. It is in everyone's best interest to agree mutually upon all terms of a project's scope and the responsibilities of each party.

A contract can also help protect you against issues with third parties such as web hosting (in the event the server goes down), domain name non-renewals (the client forgets to renew his domain name), a WordPress update goes wrong, a plug-in malfunctions, etc. You do not want to be responsible for fixing these types of things for free or paying reparations for lost business due to down time.

Oftentimes, when I ask about content and source materials, the client may want to provide copied images, etc. from another website or directly from a Google search. They may be under the impression that “anything shown on the Internet” is free to copy and use. You need to

educate them otherwise and explain about [Creative Commons](#) images to prevent any unauthorized use issues, should they arise. The safest choice would be to purchase images via Shutterstock and other such companies.

Growing Your Web Design Business

Your first new client. Where do you find them?

- Networking with friends, family or professional organizations such as BNI or local MeetUp groups.
- Ask for referrals from people you may have assisted or completed free projects for in the past.
- Contact other web and graphic design agencies, newspapers, etc. and ask if they have any projects they need off-site help with.
- Browse the web looking at other websites that may clearly need help. Contact the business owners by phone or in person (e-mail is not effective and may be discarded as spam) and offer some “friendly advice”. Casually inquire about who built and maintains their website. Often times, you will get a comment like “...we hired an agency a couple years ago but they went out of business, we didn’t care for their work, they wanted to charge too much for simple changes, etc.”

This can often be a great sign that they are willing to talk to you about helping them. If the website is horrible because it was built by “cousin Jeffrey who is learning to build websites”, be careful what you say. You don’t want to insult anyone. Even if they do acknowledge that they have a bad website, stay positive and say something like “I think Jeffrey got off to a good start but perhaps we could go in and tidy things up a bit”. Sometimes a small compliment will open doors.

- Offer rewards for referrals. I often enlist my friends, family and even existing (and past) clients to help me get a foot in the door with a new client. I offer my existing clients free hourly work credits towards their own websites and to others, or I provide a monetary percentage or gift certificate to a great local restaurant as a reward. I do this even if my referral sources are not expecting anything. It’s a great incentive and sometimes a happy surprise.

Establish yourself as a professional web authority

Clients want to be assured that they are working with someone who is experienced, knowledgeable and available to do the work they need to have done. It’s as simple as that. If they know they can rely upon you, they will stay with you for years.

Offer only services that you know you can provide or have experience with. For instance, do not offer SEO unless you can do it properly (or outsource to others who can). Even if you’re

not an expert, you should have a very good background in whatever you are offering. Bottom line is that you may not HAVE all the answers, but you better KNOW where you can find them!

Loyalty can be a fleeting thing. Sometimes you win some and you lose some.

Times and events can change, often times for better or worse. That's life. Over the past 20 years, I have accumulated a list of over 500 clients with about 180 currently active.

So what happened to the other 320? In some cases, companies went out of business, merged or sold to other companies, retired or went with an agency promising lower costs, etc. Others (usually the larger companies) decided to manage their websites in-house via an integrated content management system of franchise package, etc. The reasons are as diverse as are the types of clients served.

Some of my clients sold or merged their businesses but I still get referrals from them quite often. Although I am a little sad to lose a long time client of 15 years or more, due to a retirement or merger, I do feel good about having a major role in making their business profitable and successful. You should too.

Years ago, I would tend to take it personal when losing a client. Sometimes it would be over pricing, etc. After all, everyone needs to watch out for their own wallet. In this fast paced world, customer loyalty can be as fleeting as the wink of an eye. That's just the reality of the way things are. However, sometimes old clients DO come back. They often find that grass is sometimes not greener on the other side of the fence and will often return to you and your services. The take away from this would be to treat your clients with respect and honesty. Though finances may often dictate necessity, if you treat them well, you will never lose their respect. The ultimate reward is when they come back and are ready to "get back to work" with you.

Go out and get started NOW!

Knock on doors. Visit networking groups. If you're serious about starting a web design business you MUST treat it as a serious business in order to be successful. Most important of all have fun!