

FROM CONCEPT TO CUSTOMER:

*Winning Web Strategies
for Small Business*



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About BuyDomains

Whether you are looking for the perfect domain name for a new web site or simply trying to increase traffic to your existing web site, you will find it at BuyDomains. With our exclusive selection of over 675,000 of the world's finest domain names, you are bound to find more than one domain name that you will not want to pass up.

We have been the world's leading domain market since 1999, because of the quality of our exclusive collection and service to our customers. Our portfolio of domain names is the world's largest and grows every day.

Introduction

Defining an effective Internet and domain name strategy is vital to any business--especially small- or medium-sized businesses that have limited Web development and promotional budgets. Getting it (largely) right the first time is a must.

Your Web site should:

- Reach a broad base of potential customers, ensuring visibility for your products and services
- Convert visitors to customers
- Drive repeat business
- Include mechanisms for capturing leads, allowing you to build a database of marketable names
- Establish and build your brand

According to a recent AllBusiness.com study, nearly half of all small businesses haven't established a Web presence.

The AllBusiness.com study also shows that 61% of small businesses feel that the Internet has opened up new markets for their business, and fully 57% feel that it has lowered the cost of doing business.

This "how to" guide is designed to review some of the basic steps involved in planning for, and establishing a Web presence.

What Can a Website Do For Your Business?

The Internet is one of the single most effective tools available for building visibility, finding customers and driving revenues. But a well considered strategy is critical to success.

Before you move to acquire a domain, or to hire a Web developer, clarify your goals. What should the Web investment produce? What is involved in planning for, and launching a site? Once launched, how will you improve and maintain the site?

Strategic Considerations

How does a business owner go about developing a site which achieves the goals of driving traffic, converting this traffic into dollars and building the brand?

There are three key considerations in laying the ground work for a successful company Web site:

1. Develop a domain name strategy:

Ensure that you select memorable, marketable and relevant domain names. Investing in this aspect of your business will pay dividends later: by driving direct and organic traffic to your site, and by fostering repeat business, as customers will remember the memorable domain name.

It often makes sense to consider a strategy which incorporates multiple domains: using the name of the business as the primary domain, and other domains based on keywords to drive additional traffic.

Later in this document we will discuss an example which utilizes this multi-domain approach.

2. Select a Reputable Hosting Provider :

Select a hosting provider offering a comprehensive and affordable package of hosting services. Be sure to inquire about service level guarantees (how much down time is “allowed”; you should have an up time guarantee as near to 100% as possible), available storage, the amount of bandwidth allocated monthly, the number of email accounts offered as well security and anti-spam services. If you

intend to sell goods online you will need a provider offering SSL services and credit card handling.

Finding A Web Host:

There are a number of sites which offer reviews and comparisons of Web hosting providers, including:

- www.hostreview.com
- www.webhostmagazine.com
- www.hosting-review.com.

Think about both short- and long-term needs: you want to pick an ISP that will allow you to add services and storage as your business grows.

Be wary of picking an ISP solely on the basis of price. Reliability and customer support

services are worth paying for: an ISP which is not reliable is turning away potential customers who will likely never come back.

3. *Develop a promotional strategy for your site:*

Site promotion takes some effort, but high visibility translates into more customers, and, ultimately, will result in more money in your pocket.

When in the planning phase of site selection and building, be sure to include resources for ongoing site promotion and maintenance. Web sites need to be kept fresh and relevant in order to maintain performance.

Part I: Objectives, Timelines and Integration

What Objectives Do You Have for Your Site?

The process of: selecting a domain name, designing, launching and promoting a Web site will differ depending upon your goals and circumstances.



For those with an established bricks-and-mortar business, selecting a domain name which builds on your brand, and which customers will easily associate with your business, is a must.

Consider deploying a multi-domain strategy: using the actual name of the business as a primary domain, and incorporating “feeder domains” to drive ancillary traffic. This will capture both

those who know your business and will directly type in the domain name, and those prospective customers using keywords to search for the goods or services which you offer.

For example, if you have an Italian restaurant named “Litalios”, you may want to register litalios.com along with the domains “ItalianRestaurant.net” and “GourmetItalian.com”

Capturing customers from search traffic, in addition to direct navigation, ensures maximum traffic levels. Consider that the phrase “Italian restaurant” generated 157,356 searches in May 2006, according to Yahoo!.

For those starting a new business, promotion, and a solid domain name strategy, are even more important than in the case of an established business.

As a new business, you are starting without an established customer base, and generating interest in the site quickly and effectively is a primary challenge.

The domain which you choose may be a business name, it may be a keyword or phrase, or it could be selected because it is evocative of a particular mood, or feeling.

A newly founded Carolina realty firm might have several domains: including the firm name in .com, .net and .biz form. The business owner may opt to select secondary domains such as “CarolinasRealty.com” to capture geographically-oriented keyword traffic.

If the realty business is focused on a particular market niche, or the business owner wishes to instill a particular mindset in a customer before they even view the website “VillageEstates.com”, or a similarly evocative domain could be a valuable addition to the site portfolio.

Setting Revenue Goals

Are you planning on incorporating e-commerce into your site? If so, establish revenue goals as part of your site development plan. Measure and adjust your Web promotion strategy over time in order to achieve traffic and revenue targets.

When establishing e-commerce goals benchmark norms for your industry:

- Remember seasonal variations, if applicable
- Factor in synergies between your Web site and your bricks-and-mortar business.
- Leverage cross-promotional opportunities: if you have a bricks-and-mortar venue, display sign-ups in your store for an e-newsletter, or e-coupons. You can send promotions out at intervals during slower business seasons, driving traffic when it is most needed.

Evaluating a site’s performance may be direct: if you are an e-tailer you can measure sites visits, the percentage of visitors who actually convert to customers, the average value of each sale, the monetary value of specific promotions, and so forth.

If you are offering services, monetizing site traffic is more challenging—though it is worthwhile to try and assess top revenue drivers and referral sources.

Request information about the referral channel through Web forms, include promotions with coded offers in your marketing; offer free evaluations or assessments via specific channels so that you can measure the response. And, encourage your sales staff to ask prospects where they heard about your business.

Establish and Build Your Brand

Web site visitors form a positive or negative impression within seconds, so your home page has to be: 1) appealing, 2) clearly explain what your business is, and 3) offer visitors a clear path to navigate the site.

The branding on your home page has to work well--and work quickly--to make the desired impression on the consumer.

Branding is reinforced by multiple elements on a page: photos and graphics, color palette, and the amount and placement of text.

Consistency in all your communications—on- and off-site is important in building and maintaining brand integrity.



In our Italian restaurant example: “Litalios”, it is probably a good idea to incorporate visual elements which are reflective of the dining experience. Photos of a relaxed family dining with a red check table cloth will appeal to a different audience than will photographs of a very formally dressed couple dining by candlelight.

Adopt a color palette for the site which reflects this mood, as well as appropriate industry, or cultural elements. In our this example, a palette of warm Tuscan colors on the site, which reflects the restaurant's colors, sets the mood before customers even arrive at the location.

Keep this look and feel consistent across all marketing elements: the site, the newsletter, and, when applicable, the product packaging and the physical store.

Having a memorable logo is also helpful in branding. Think of the “swoosh” that is seen on a certain brand of basketball shoes; it is very likely that you immediately thought of the company name and brand—without it being mentioned here—because you have seen that as a consistent branding element over the years.

Defining Your Internet Strategy

- *Development Timeline:* Develop a project plan for development of you site. Set milestones: knowing if you are on-, or off-track and keeping to a schedule allows you to make adjustments quickly when you see schedules drift.

How long will it take to bring your site from concept to reality? Consider external dependencies, if any. Do you wish to incorporate dynamic feeds from third parties--real estate listings from a central listing agency, for example? Or, is your site less complex and more self-contained? Does it involve flash animation, or database-driven interactivity? If so, be sure to factor in sufficient time for this extra work.

In considering dynamic elements, prioritize development projects, evaluate cost, and ask yourself: “do these elements truly drive sales and improve the customer experience?” If they do not, they are likely to prove expensive and ineffective, at best, or annoying and distracting to customers, at worst.

Note: You may wish to secure your domain(s) and “park” them while you have

the site in development. You can earn pay-per-click advertising revenues while you work toward bringing your site online, and you will avoid losing your desired domains to a competitor.

- *Market Research:* Make sure to research your market niche carefully and thoroughly. Know how the segment uses the Internet, how often they shop, and what sites are already popular with this demographic.

Some of your best research can be done by exploring those sites which are already successfully targeting your desired audience and gleaning the best elements from each.

You should also visit competitor sites to understand their market position and brand. Identify the weak and strong elements of their Web sites: learn from their mistakes and triumphs.

Entrepreneur.com has a helpful section on market research:
http://www.entrepreneur.com/Your_Business/YB_Node/0,4507,122,00.html

- *Launching Your Site, Timing is Important:* Consider when to launch your site: do you want to kick-off during the months of July or August, when Internet traffic is typically at its lowest ebb? Do you have a significant proportion of your inventory tied up in seasonal items? Are there external events which draw focus to your market niche, and will therefore help to generate greater interest in your market segment? All of these questions should be factored into the development and launch timeline.

Part II Site Promotion

Site Promotion

Organic traffic—where your site shows up in search results listings—is free, and obviously you want to maximize the number of free leads you can gather.

It does take some time to incorporate elements of search engine optimization (SEO) in your pages, but the return on investment is typically very high.

What is SEO?

“Short for search engine optimization, the process of increasing the amount of visitors to a Web site by ranking high in the search results of a search engine

The higher a Web site ranks in the results of a search, the greater the chance that that site will be visited by a user.”

—definition from *Webopedia.com*

- Elements of SEO include:
 - Page title optimization*

For example: in our “Litalios” example, you may want to title the index page: “Litalios: Chicago’s best family-style Italian restaurant” This incorporates the name of the venue, its location, the type of cuisine and the style of dining.
 - Inclusion of meta data (keywords) in the <head> section of the HTML document*

Keywords for “Litalios” might include: Italian food, Italian

- iii. *Inclusion of keywords in page text and alt tags*
restaurant, Chicago restaurants, family dining, Italian dining
All of the keywords from above, and other related terms, should be found in the text on the home page; for pages linked off of the home page, say an “Italian Desserts” page, you might choose a more specific title, set of keywords and text for the “alt” tags on images featured on the page
- iv. *Links in the Site*
Links between pages within the site will help “spiders” to “crawl” the site and will improve rankings. External links to your site can also help to bolster search engine results
- v. *Site submission (to the search engines)*
Hand submission to key sites like Yahoo!, Google, MSN and others will jump start the process of getting your pages into organic search rankings

- Keyword buys: Google, Yahoo! and other sites offer paid placements, based on keywords, in their search results. Even if you have good position in organic search, cross-promotion with paid placements is most effective in driving Web traffic
- Additional promotion—banner placements, newsletter sponsorships, and participation in affiliate programs are good complementary Internet-based means of driving site traffic. If you have a localized market, consider print placements, direct mail and participation in local events in conjunction with your online spend.

Keeping site content fresh and dynamic is essential if you hope to drive repeat visits. Refreshed content also helps to maintain search engine rankings: new content is automatically “spidered” by search engines, and pages can be “bumped up” the ladder, so that the link shows up earlier in organic search results.

Measurement & Metrics

As you explore hosting providers, be sure to delve into the reporting options offered by each. For sites including e-commerce, be sure to review features offered to track shopping cart activity.

As you create your Web development and site launch plan, consider your traffic goals.

- Establish traffic goals for desired number of:
 - Unique & total visitors per week/month
 - Sessions per week/month (a visitor may have more than one session on your site in a given week or month)
 - Repeat visitors as a percentage of total visitors.
 - Top pages
 - Top entry/exit pages
 - Time spent on pages
 - Total Kb transferred (Web hosting packages are often sold with a designated amount of bandwidth allocated; if your traffic is growing, keep track of this as you may wish to upgrade your hosting package)

(You may establish a more extensive list—the point is to think about what types, and levels of, activity are significant for *your* business.)

- Determine your traffic goals based on:
 - The level of planned promotion,

- Typical sector traffic
- The number of external links to your site which might drive traffic

Set conversion targets: what percentage of visitors convert to customers? What percentage of visitors are repeat site surfers, and of these, what number become repeat customers?



Identifying and cultivating your best customers is good business practice. Consider a “frequent flyers” club--provide incentives which drive repeat business: you can implement e-coupon offers easily in most shopping carts. A weekly promotional email to your best customers, sent with their permission, is likely to yield good results, for example.

Factor in seasonal variations and external drivers as you set traffic goals. You may have to work harder at certain times of the year to drive traffic and sell your products. On the whole, Internet traffic slows during summer months due to vacations.

Part III Execution

Building & Promoting Your Site

Who is going to build and maintain your site? As a small businessperson, you may or may not have the skills, and time to build and maintain a site.

Using a Third Party Vendor

If time, or expertise is an issue, it may be more cost-effective to have your site developed, promoted or maintained by a third party. If you are thinking of engaging a vendor, be sure to do some basic research before engaging them. Sites like guru.com and elance.com are good places to seek out information about freelancers and firms available for hire—and you can research costs there as well.

Write out a set of business requirements for your site. At a minimum, you should answer these questions:

- What do you want customers to be able to do once they hit your site?
 - How will they navigate through your pages?
 - How will you organize the information on your site?
 - What standing elements will appear on all pages?
- Will they be purchasing goods directly?
 - How do you want your shopping cart configured?
 - Will you be offering promotional coupons or discounts? If so, how will customers redeem these?
 - Will they be able to flag “wish list” items for later purchase?
 - Once they have purchased, what happens?
- Will they be filling out forms to subscribe to newsletter lists, or promotional lists? How will this information be stored? How will users unsubscribe if they decide that they no longer want to receive offers?
- How will you handle customer service issues or inquiries?
- Is your site going to be developed in phases, as your business grows, or

are you looking for a full implementation on launch?

Work on a “story board”—where you literally map out the user experience step-by-step. This exercise can help you to eliminate less useful elements from your plan—and focus on those elements which drive revenues.

Benchmark sites which have the same basic features and user experience which you are hoping to develop. Navigate these sites as if you were a customer; note the elements which you feel are good, and those which are problematic. Incorporating these findings into your planning will speed up site development, eliminate missteps and should result in a better user experience.

Promotion

Once you have drafted business requirements, and established a project plan, you can focus on long-term maintenance and promotion.

Identify the individual, or team members, who will handle site changes, customer service inquiries and site promotion. Draft a promotional calendar which incorporates marketing offers, content changes and site updates; this will facilitate the planning and implementation process.

If your business is not hiring or contracting someone experienced in site promotion, and you will handle that in-house, you will need to get up to speed on the basic elements of Web marketing.

Begin by researching topics such as: search engine optimization (SEO), keyword purchases, newsletter sponsorships, banner advertising and email marketing.

There are lots of sites which offer good information about site promotion and marketing for small business:

- [The Wall Street Journal's Start-Up Journal](#)
- [Entrepreneur.com's Small Business Section](#)
- [Yahoo!'s Small Business Section](#)

Improve Your Site Over Time: Incorporate Customer Feedback

Improving the user experience requires input from visitors. In your site development plan, consider how you will solicit feedback from visitors and customers. Will you have a



feedback form? What information will be available on the “Contact Us” section of the site, and how will this facilitate customer communication? In addition to offering a passive means for customers to contact you, will you also reach out to customers to ask for their feedback—soliciting input via your newsletter, or other communications?

Capturing and utilizing feedback is a multi-step process. First: gather feedback. Second, determine the specific elements in the site which need to be modified

in order to address any problems identified by customers. Third, communicate these changes to your customers. Letting customers know that you have changed your site to better meet their needs (based on their input) is not only courteous, it is good business practice. Consumers want to do business where they feel valued and understood.

Some concrete ways to encourage feedback and foster a dialogue with your customers:

- Include language on your site which encourages feedback:
- Provide a clear navigational path for providing input—typically consumers click on the “Contact Us” button as a first step. Be sure that you have multiple means of contacting you available on this page (email, a form, a street address, a telephone and a fax number)
- If you have a feedback form, be sure to have a confirmation page which thanks those customers who do provide feedback—their input can help to drive your success

Summary

Launching a successful Web site is one of the single most important steps which any small business can take, but doing it well does require planning, investment and commitment to the long-term. But the potential upside is too big to ignore. E-commerce revenues worldwide will surpass \$500 billion in 2006.

More than 1 billion people use the Internet worldwide--there are over 227 million in North America alone. Growth rates of nearly 200% in the number of Internet users are expected in 2006.

With revenues and traffic climbing in nearly every online sector, small businesses should see opportunity for years to come.