

Getting Started on the Internet

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We don't have a website, and don't have any money to put towards building one, right now. Our customers are always telling me I should have a website, so they can look me up on the internet. I hear websites can be really expensive to do right. And I wish that we had one. It's just not in the financial cards right now. My business is a small service company, based in Stamford. What should I do? Where do I start?

Websites are like phone book listings in the old days. Potential customers today open up their internet browser, type in your company's name, and . . . nothing! . . . because you're not there. The world wide web is like a giant phone book, only better, and without a web address and website, your company doesn't exist. It doesn't cost much to get started, so start with the basics, and build a framework which you can expand over time.

Your first job will be to find a name that isn't already in use on the internet. This will be called your "domain name". Network Solutions' WHOIS, and GoDaddy are a couple of examples of places to look up names on the internet. Be prepared to try lots of name combinations, such as company name or a description of what your company does.

Don't get frustrated if many of the names you want to try are already in use. Keep trying until

you find one or more names that work for you. If you plan to use a name that is a plural, check if the singular version of the name is also available. If it is, grab the singular version as well. If the singular version isn't available, check out who has it, and decide if you want to be one "s" away from that web identify.

Once you find a name you like, grab it immediately. Have your credit card standing by. Domain registration should run you a few dollars / year. You will also need to select a "web host". Web hosting has become a commodity, so pricing is low, often under \$10 / month to get started, more as you add services, cheaper in the long run if you pay upfront for a longer commitment. Check references and research your options. Some firms are local. Many web designers provide hosting services. And most domain registration firms also offer hosting. You lots of options.

Now that you have a domain name and web host lined up, your next decision is what you want to do on the web. Here are a few examples of what you can do with a website:

- announce who you are
- sell products or services
- take orders, reservations and service requests
- relay information to clients
- educate prospects
- invite people to sign up for things

- connect people

Start simply, with a one page announcement of who you are. Provide visitors with ways to contact you – list your phone, snail-mail address, and email address. Use pictures as well as words. If you're not sure what kinds of pictures to use, consider pictures of clients, people in your company doing what they do, and products your company sells. The web is a great place to make what you do tangible; take advantage of the opportunity.

Get your one page announcement built right away. If you google "do it yourself websites" you'll find lots of advice and options. Look at competitor sites for ideas. Find support through networking groups, industry associations, suppliers, your web host, web designers, and by asking other small business owners how they got started.

Decide if you're going to do it yourself, or hire someone to help you get started. Factor in the cost of your time, and your skill at doing things on the internet. If money is tight you may have to do it yourself, working weekends and evenings. Set a deadline. Remember, your goal is to have one professional looking page up on the internet a.s.a.p.

Once you have an announcement page on the web, start on your plan for the future. Interview people who could help develop



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your website. Lay out on paper what you would eventually like the website to look like, including 4 – 6 major categories of information, such as who we are, who are our customers, what we offer, information on our industry, how to contact us. Develop a basic framework on which you can expand. Learn about key words, links and search engine optimization. Set a budget, and put aside money each month, to fund website development. Get a plan, and an education, so you are prepared to develop your website over time.

Looking for a good book? Try *Create Your Own Website (Second Edition)* by Scott Mitchell.

Business owners regularly turn to Ask Andi and Strategy Leaders for advice on how to grow profitable, successful companies. They find what they need time after time. Specific advice is available at www.AskAndiBlog.com. Ask Andi is also published weekly in the Westchester and Fairfield County Business Journals and Hudson Valley Business. Written by Strategy Leaders President, Andi Gray, the Ask Andi column is a rich source of advice for owners of established, privately held businesses.

*If you are a business owner and you have a question or would like to discuss some aspect of your business, call **1.877.238.3535** or send an email to AskAndi@StrategyLeaders.com.*

O: 914-238-3500. • F: 914-238-2529
AskAndi@StrategyLeaders.com • www.StrategyLeaders.com
Strategy Leaders, Inc. • 5 Crossways, Chappaqua, NY 10514

