

Ask SCORE

I recently opened a sports memorabilia shop and now want to add an online component to sell my merchandise via the Internet. I plan to hire someone to design my website, but am looking for advice to provide that person with guidance and direction.

Nearly every small business has a website today...and no wonder. A 2011 Pew Internet study found that nearly half of all searches for local businesses are conducted online (newspapers finished a distant second). And usually, a company's website is the first place prospective customers go when those search engine results come up.

But what will they find when they get there? Unless you provide visitors with an attractive, informative, easy-to-use and up-to-date website, they'll quickly hit the BACK key and see what your competitors have to offer.

The good news is that a website that effectively turns visitors into customers is not all that difficult to create and maintain. Appearance is always important, but the key is to consider the customer's perspective—what kind of information are they looking for about your product or service, why are they looking for it, and what will make it easier for them to find it on your site.

Let's begin with looks. A picture is worth a thousand words, but images shouldn't be the only thing visitors see. Nor should they be confronted with huge blocks of text. Find the right balance that most effectively conveys who you are and what you do.

Also remember that not every customer wants or needs to know everything about your business. Compose product or service descriptions in varying levels of detail, giving visitors the option to click for additional details.

That makes a website's structure and navigation particularly critical. Can customers find what they want fast? Are categories clear and well-defined? Is access to your products/services, rates, hours of operations, etc., intuitive and logical? Is it easy to back up a few pages and start in a new direction? Is there a search function with well-defined keywords that can help direct them to specific areas of the site?

If you're using your website to sell products, make sure the shopping process is simple and clear-cut. Display all costs early on—shipping and handling, optional features, etc. Studies have found that hidden costs are the primary reason customers abandon their online purchases.

And ask only for the information necessary to fulfill the customer's order; don't disguise a marketing research survey as an order form. You can get that data by inviting the customer to participate in a follow-up satisfaction survey after the purchase has been completed. And if you've provided good service, he or she will likely be more than happy to help.

This column is brought to you by the Merrimack Valley Chapter of SCORE, with nearly 70 current and former business executives available to provide free, confidential, one-on-one business mentoring and training workshops for area businesses. Call 603-666-7561 or visit merrimackvalley.score.org for information on mentoring, upcoming workshops and volunteer opportunities. SCORE is a national, non-profit organization and a resource partner of the U. S. Small Business Administration.