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Building your business Web site

By Dave Chappelle posted on 9/18/2002

Whether you do it yourself or hire a pro, there are a few things to consider when creating an online presence

Of the numerous communications we receive, one of the most frequently asked questions is "How do I pick a Web site designer or host for my business?" We let Technology Reviewer Dave Chappelle out of the TCP Test Lab long enough to find some answers for our readers.--Editor

After years of avoiding the inevitable, you've finally decided to create an online presence for your business. Where do you start? First, you need to understand that there are two main components to the Internet presence equation: design and hosting. Other secondary components are important, but for now we'll concentrate on these two.

It's common knowledge that small to medium-size enterprises represent the largest portion of the Canadian business market. So, there are plenty of services catering to businesses in this category that want an Internet presence--from "free" to price-is-no-object offerings. We've looked at a few.

"Free" hosting

For those with very little capital, you can find free or almost-free Web hosting.

You can begin with the free Web space most ISPs (Internet service providers) give their subscribers. It's usually at least 5 MB, which is enough to store some HTML files and possibly a JPEG image or two.

However, personal Web space offered by ISPs is meant for showing off things like pictures of family, pets, or a new bike, not for commercial purposes.

Most ISPs will shut you down if the traffic to your site exceeds a set limit. Even if ISP administrative gnomes are too busy to stop you from using the site for business purposes, excessive traffic to your site could prevent many of those who want to visit from being able to do so. Do you really want a potential customer to see the dreaded "page not found" error message?

If you haven't registered a domain name, and don't want or can't afford to pay the \$39 plus GST to do so, some free hosting sites will give you a URL (uniform resource locator) for your site that looks something like www.yourbusiness.freehostservice.com.

However, not only can this type of URL be difficult to remember, it's instantly recognizable as a free site and may not inspire the confidence of potential customers.

If you decide to go with a free Web host service, you need to consider its long-term viability. The pattern of dot-com failures in the last couple of years has proven that giving away a service for free is a difficult business model.

One company that seems to be making that formula work, however, is Bizhosting (www.Bizhosting.com).

Company representative Jim Lee explains, "We don't really make any money on the hosting that we give away for free. We try to offset the cost of hosting these free sites by requiring advertising banners on the sites' pages, but that doesn't really cover much of our cost of providing the service. For the most part, we treat the cost of running the free service as a marketing expense."

Bizhosting clients get 20 MB of free Web space and can use a subdomain (that includes "bizhosting" in its name) or their own domain (.com, .net, or .org), which they have to register and, of course, pay for.

If a client's free site approaches or exceeds the bandwidth limit, they can upgrade to one of the monthly pay services without any interruption, says Lee.

"A small business can set up shop on our free service, and never have to worry about moving it again. Our clustered server technology allows any site on our system to scale from just a few hits a day, to tens or hundreds of thousands without any difference in the speed at which it is served."

Upgrade packages can include more bandwidth, Web space, email accounts, real-time credit card processing support, and priority phone support.

"We don't force people to upgrade," says Lee, "we simply let them try it out, and then hope they will like our service enough that they will want to upgrade. In a way, it is a little bit like the shareware model."

A similar service is offered by Kyrgyzstan-based United Net (www.united.net.kg). It too hopes users upgrade to services after using the free offerings. U.S.-based Brinkster (www.brinkster.com) does offer one basic free hosting package, but its features are severely limited.

Professional hosting

Although it is a major consideration, price isn't everything. Flip through The Computer Paper and you'll see dozens of hosting services offering a wide range of Web hosting packages. To help you choose, check Web hosting company sites for explanations.

For example, Domain Wizardry (www.DomainWizardry.com) provides load-balanced data centres, instead of one or two servers, and dual operation

balanced data centres, instead of one or two servers, and dual operating systems standard, which it claims no other company offers.

NextWebHosting (www.nextwebhosting.com), a division of Elosoft (www.elosoft.com), offers 15 months of service for the price of 12.

Of course Web designers have their own idea of which company provides the best hosting. Usually this is determined by the experience a design company has had with a particular host. But sometimes it's decided by the terms of the deal struck with the host in which the design company becomes a hosting reseller. Ask those you know, and avail yourself of the "contact" button on hosting company Web sites. The timeliness, tone, and degree of professionalism in the replies you receive can help you decide on a hosting firm.

Do-it-yourself design

How do you design a Web site? You can use many of the free or inexpensive Web site design packages. Learning them is just like learning to use another software application.

Or you can learn HTML. It's even easier, and you can impress your friends with your knowledge. By conducting a search on "HTML tutorial" we found HTML Goodies (www.htmlgoodies.com) and Make a Web Site (makeawebsite.com). From those two sites and others we learned enough HTML to create a simple site on our own. For a comprehensive list of HTML tutorials see putertutor.net (www.putertutor.net).

If you want fancy graphics, lots of eye-catching movement, and plenty of distractions on your page, doing it in plain HTML will take a lot of time. An easier way to that end is learning Macromedia Flash (www.macromedia.com). A free trial version of the software can be downloaded from the company's site.

You should also learn something about Web site design and use. Start by visiting Jakob Neilson's site (www.useit.com). Neilson is the absolute authority on Web site design and usability. Another good design tutorial site is aksi.net (www.aksi.net).

Designer Vincent Flanders has written a funny book exploring the fundamentals of good design by exposing really bad design. The book is Web Sites That Suck and the site is, of course, websiteshatsuck.com. If you read the book and/or visit the site, you'll see examples similar to your favourite sites, your friend's sites, and other popular sites that you might have thought were good until Flanders pointed out the flaws.

Professional design

However, sometimes it's cheaper--and almost always faster--in the long run to hire a professional.

"Web developers are a dime a dozen" says Jeremy Slaven of DS1 Design (www.dsonedesign.com). "While anyone can use a Web builder to cut and paste elements into their Web site, the visual impact, interface cleanliness, and use of colour for a professional corporate Web presence is best left to professional, innovative, and talented design teams in conjunction with your development team."

So how do you choose a Web designer? The temptation to jump on the Internet bandwagon, overspend, and listen to a supposed Web guru can be strong, especially for business people who aren't Web savvy. Start by asking yourself what you want from a Web site.

Dino Esposito of Media Dog Productions (www.mediadog.net) advises, "Before rushing out and going for what you or others think is cool, ask yourself: "What do I specifically need?" and "In what order do I need to get it?" Any potential Web designer will most likely ask you these questions as well, and if you have the answers ready it will make your initial contact that much easier."

Slaven says, "Be prepared before you call anyone. Have a solid plan and wish list for your corporate Web presence before you do anything."

Next, ask everybody you know who has a Web site how they made their design choices, how much the design work cost, and how much time was required to complete it. Check the site, its ease of use, and note your likes and dislikes. Then check the site of the design company behind it to learn about its design philosophy and what areas it specializes in. A successful Web design firm should also have links to clients' pages. You can ask those clients directly about their experience working with the designers.

Having an idea of the type of site you want helps when communicating with the design company. "Are you assigned a personal point of contact? You don't want to end up as the small company dealing with a large Web development team or you may always have difficulty trying to get things done on time and on budget," says Esposito. "Make sure that your Web team doesn't treat you like a number, and that you have access to all work in progress."

Slaven agrees: "When you call the design/development firm, ask for the creative director or lead project manager. Titles vary from company to company, but make sure you speak to a person in a senior, decision-making position. That way you'll have direct access to the person with final say on your price. The senior exec may not directly handle your project, but putting yourself in contact with them gives you more leverage when negotiating your position as a buyer."

Ask about each firm's experience designing the type of site you prefer. Have they performed other functions, such as back end databases, forms, auto-responders, and shopping cart designs? How much do they know about Web site marketing?

Then become a choosy shopper. While it's a poorly kept industry secret that having your site appear first in a search engine query requires payment, some firms will guarantee top 10 or top 20 placement with major search engines and directories.

Esposito suggests asking for guarantees on delivery date and site functionality. Slaven recommends obtaining quotes from other firms to ensure the one you're interested in is projecting reasonable timelines and cost.

Care and control

At the very least, your Web site is a worldwide advertisement that works for you 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so it will require maintenance. As Roger "Chicken" Butcher (www.rogerbutcher.com) says: "The condition of your sign is a direct indication of the quality of service you provide."

If you have to call or email the designer every time you want to change something on your Web site, you're going to be spending more time and

money than necessary.

"In response to customer requests for complete access and control, we designed an administration page, customizing the interface for each company," says Al Redpath of Outrageous Creations! (www.OutrageousCreations.com).

From this admin page it's possible to add, edit, and delete products and categories, to move categories around and create subcategories, and upload and change product images, all in real time. Page content can be changed and changes will appear instantly.

Outrageous Creations! also puts a complete mailing list system at its clients' disposal, one without all the junk added by commercial mailing lists such as Yahoo! and eGroups. If a featured product is to be sent, the system automatically generates an HTML email with product thumbnails and links to product pages.

Redpath explains "The whole system is completely customizable too. It can be hooked up to any shopping cart system including Cart32, DXcart, Cafepress, my own cart system, etc. All elements are modular, so if you don't like the layout of the list-products pages, it can be switched out and replaced with a completely different layout. The same goes for the Show Product view; it can be set up to look and act like any style of online store."

For companies without the need for constant product updating, perhaps an automatic updater is the way to go. Says Media Dog's Esposito: "There are many options for keeping your site fresh and exciting. A Web content management solution is great in that you can personally keep your site fresh, without incurring the extra costs of relying on a Web development team to perform your site updates. Some fully automated sites can drive themselves."

By DAVE CHAPPELLE

Comments

Another good Tutorial site

Posted by: [Bill](#), 9/22/2002

Another good tutorial site for HTML is <http://www.webmonkey.com>. Very simple and easy to read tutorials on html and more advanced technologies like ASP, Javascript, XML, SQL, etc

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