FREE AND EASY OPTIONS FOR YOUR SMALL BUSINESS

Putting Your Business Online

GETTING ONLINE IS MORE IMPORTANT AND EASIER THAN EVER

First we had phone books. Then the Yellow Pages. And they're still useful if you know exactly what you're looking for. But nowadays most customers first go to the Internet to search for products and services. What's more, if shoppers can't find you online, they may simply overlook your business and go elsewhere.

Pew Research recently found that nearly 60 percent of all Americans and 78 percent of regular Internet users research products and services online before purchase. Pew Research also found that 92 percent of Americans use search engines at least occasionally. The numbers say it all: Your business absolutely needs a web presense so customers can find you.

This factsheet offers three ways you can get started putting your business online: (1) create a web presence using free and easy tools, (2) correct your business listings already on the Internet, and (3) connect with University of Minnesota Extension for free and affordable workshops and consultations.

LAUNCH A WEBSITE

Businesses that want an online presence typically build a website. In the past, this usually meant hiring a web designer or spending a lot of time learning software to do it yourself. Today, however, websites come in many forms, including some that are simple for a beginner to build. Here are a few "free and easy" options for creating a web presence.

Set up a basic website: Weebly

You can spend money to register your domain name and hire a company to host your website, but you can do those things for free with services like Weebly. This online tool also lets you easily construct your own basic website by dropping and dragging components into place (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Weebly example
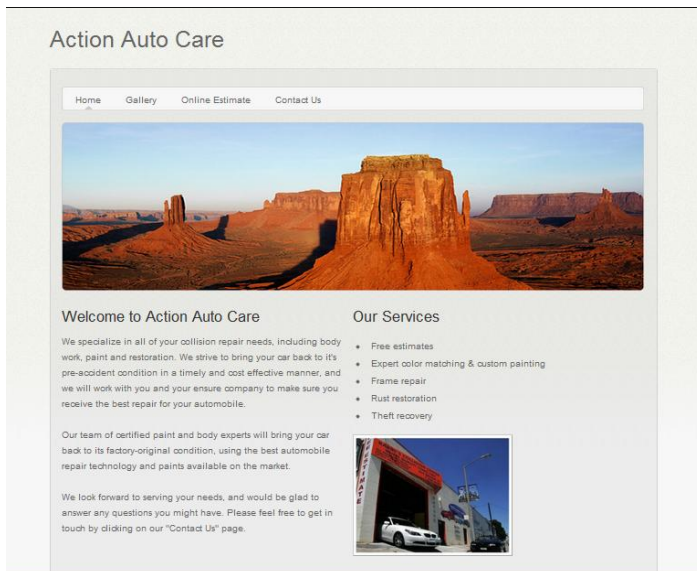
Basic websites often serve as the main web presence for small businesses, providing information such as location, hours of operation, contact information, and brief descriptions of products and services. Most business websites have easy-to-remember dot-com domain names, such as www.mywebsite.com, and it's a good idea to promote your website address in advertising and marketing materials. To get started with Weebly, sign up for an account at www.weebly.com and choose a template (a set format or "look") into which you add your own content, including text, pictures, and video.

Use word-of-mouth advertising: Facebook Business Page

According to the "How Many Are There?" website, as of May 2011, more than 150 million Americans had a Facebook account that they used to keep in touch with family and friends, as well as "follow" famous people, favorite places and all kinds of things—including businesses.

As a result, many businesses have launched their own Facebook pages to connect with customers. The idea is to share deals, insights, or pose provocative questions that inspire followers to spread the word about your business to their network of family and friends on Facebook. This is old-fashioned word-of-mouth advertising, but online.

Facebook business pages have the same look and offer many of the same features as personal Facebook pages (See Figure 2). Facebook offers business pages free of charge to companies.

Figure 2: Facebook Business Page example

If you start a business Facebook page, you will want to promote it in your marketing and advertising materials (including your website, if you have one). This way customers will start following you and receive notices of updates to your page on their personal Facebook pages. Features on Facebook also encourage existing followers to share your page with others. The process is similar to building and using a mailing list, although you get to interact more with your customers.

If you already have a personal Facebook page, you can simply add a business page to your account and can log in the same as you do now. If you are new to Facebook, you need to create an account. To get started, go to www.facebook.com/pages/create.php and follow the prompts.

Tell your story with an online journal: Blogs

A blog is short for "web log" and is an online journal, organized by day of entry. Some businesses use a blog for their primary website, especially businesses whose personal stories help sell their product. Other businesses use blogs to drive traffic to their basic website.

Like simple website programs, blog software is easy to use, maintain, and update. You can create a blog and start posting entries within minutes. You can also interact with customers via their comments on your blog (see Figure 3). The challenging aspects of blogging are in content creation. First, you want to share interesting and/or valuable information so your readers will become customers. Second, you want to update information regularly and in a timely manner—even if it's small changes. Otherwise, readers will think your blog is out of date and stop reading it.

Figure 3: Blog example
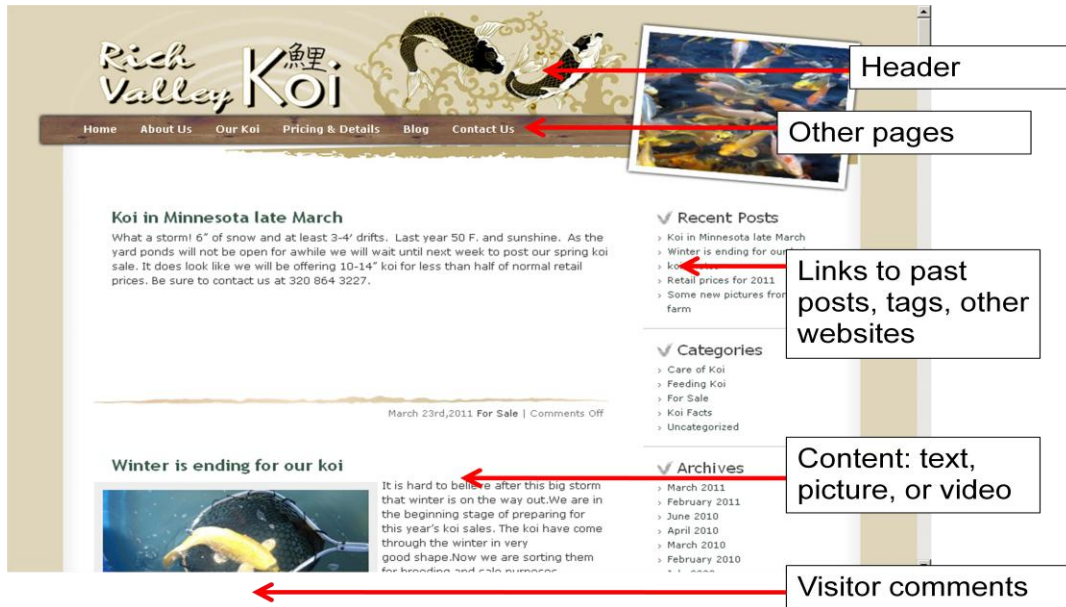
There are two major free blog providers today:

1) Blogger at http://www.blogger.com and,

2) Wordpress at http://www.wordpress.com.

Each offers pre-designed templates or the ability to create a blog with your own look and feel. To get started, go to Blogger or Wordpress and follow the prompts to create an account and set up your blog page.

CORRECT EXISTING ONLINE LISTINGS

Many owners and operators are surprised to find that information about their business is already on the Internet even though they did not put it there. The Internet contains a vast array of information, and some aggregator or "people finder" services constantly scour the web and organize information from many sources on their websites. Don't despair. This information is not out of your control. A few actions will put you in the driver's seat.

Correct your business contact information: Business Aggregators

Business aggregators are websites that gather and post basic information about individual businesses in one place. Some of these aggregators may sound familiar to you: Merchant Circle, Manta, and Superpages. Whether you had contact with these organizations or not, they are using search engines to pull information, such as your phone number, address, and products, from other websites. Or they are buying databases with information about your business and posting it on their sites.

Aggregator websites can either serve your business well or scuttle it if customers find incorrect information. Most major aggregators allow you to "claim" your listing and make corrections for free. The challenge is to create and manage accounts for each aggregator.

Your first step is to find your business on aggregator sites and check your information for errors. Type the address of the aggregator into a web browser and search for your business by city and name:

- www.superpages.com

- www.manta.com

- www.merchantcircle.com

After checking your information, click near where it typically reads "Are you the business owner?" and follow the screen prompts to claim and take control of your listing.

Get your location in the right place: Google Maps

Digital maps like Google Maps and Mapquest keep gaining in popularity as web designers integrate maps into mobile phone applications and basic websites. Travelers often punch keywords, such as "restaurant" or "food," into a map on their phone to find their way in an unfamiliar community. As with business aggregators, too often the information they find is incorrect, including the location of the business itself. Maps on a phone or in a GPS unit can direct customers miles away or to a dead end street, a frustrtating process which is not a favorable first impression any business wants to make.

Figure 4: Google Map Listing example
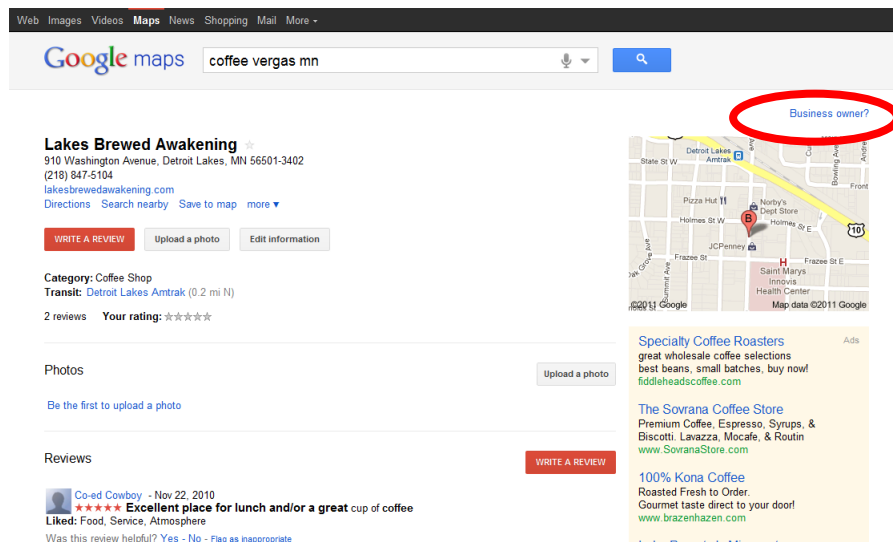
Google Maps stands today as both the most popular and influential digital map, so turn your attention to it first. As with aggregators, your first order of business is checking whether your information is correct or not. Go to www.maps.google.com and search for your business. Once there, click on "Business owner?" (see Figure 4) and follow the prompts to claim your listing and make any corrections. Once claimed, you can also add pictures, website addresses, and even digital coupons to your listing to make it stand out in the crowd.

FREE AND AFFORDABLE RESOURCES FOR COMMUNITIES

Educators from University of Minnesota Extension provide free workshops and consultations in select rural Minnesota communities to help businesses get started online or improve their use of the Internet. Workshops are also available at an affordable fee in other communities. Contact any educator for more information:

- Adeel Ahmed, Central Minnesota: 320-203-6109 or ahme0004@umn.edu

- John Bennett, Northeast Minnesota: 218-726-6471 or jbennett@umn.edu

- Neil Linscheid, Southwest Minnesota: 507-337-2814 or lins0041@umn.edu

- Ryan Pesch, West Central Minnesota: 218-770-4398 or pesch@umn.edu

- Bruce Schwartau, Southeast Minnesota: 507-536-6308 or bwschwar@umn.edu

You can learn more about how your business can use the Internet at http://www.extension.umn.edu/community/mirc

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