

"It's easy to build a website," says Walters. "But to build a successful website, you need to look at it like a business. And, like any business, you need to nurture it and market it in order to be successful."

Indeed, there are several powerful reasons to start a website for your business. However, you do need to ask why you need a website and decide what you want it to accomplish before you even contact someone to help you.

I'm Ready, Now What?

Despite all of the good reasons to build a website, running a site requires far more planning and work than simply deciding what color to make the background and what your home page will look like. There are several important aspects of managing a successful website, from choosing a host to maintaining the site to planning for future growth, and having done some of your homework in advance will save you time later on in the process.

Once you make the decision to develop a website, develop a list of sites you like and why and another list of sites you don't like and why. Consider everything from visual design, category selections, ability to zoom in on products, check out functionality and how to showcase new items as just some examples.

Clutch Accessories, a new manufacturer of diaper bags, knew it would start an online business from the beginning. "We wanted to target direct sales as part of our business

plan," says Amy Duffin, president and founder of Clutch Accessories. "We knew that a website was a critical part of achieving this goal." The site, www.ClutchAccessories.com, went live in August 2007 after three months of working with a dedicated team at OverCoffee Productions.

Duffin knew she and her partner, Rose Rivera, didn't have the expertise or time to build a website by themselves. However, they knew what they liked since they are active Web shoppers, and they knew what they wanted from a Web design company. They were referred to OverCoffee Productions through a friend. They researched several companies and compared each to see who was a best fit for them based on Web design, functionality, cost, and personality. They chose OverCoffee Productions and never looked back.

Children know that the best way to learn is to ask plenty of questions. Follow their lead and do the same. Hauge believes that is one of the most valuable things to do when interviewing Web designers. "They are creative, but not mind readers."

Gudai agrees and even though they were among the first companies to harness the power of the Web for their business, they took the time to research other websites, even sites outside of their industry.

Gudai adds that companies should ask for references from Web

developers—and to contact those references. "It is important to qualify the developer and have long, in-depth discussions prior to entering any agreement," Guidai says. "You need to trust and feel good about the Web developer."

Attempting to learn exactly why you want a website and exactly what you need your website to do requires plenty of questions, too. The worst thing is to not do anything because you're afraid to start. By aligning yourself with a Web design professional who will help you through the process, you will save yourself a lot of headaches, time and money.

And while Dean concedes that everyone should be online, he disagrees that everyone needs a website. "Companies don't need a website, they need a plan and means to be successful online," Dean says. And that's why marketing is critical to any website strategy.

It's Still a Business—Market it as such

Nonetheless, while the process of designing websites receives plenty of publicity, it's the day-to-day, behind-the-scenes work performed in running a website that is more important to the long-term success of your site.

"A good site is a great foundation, but unless it's supported by a solid, integrated marketing plan and the commitment to keep it fresh, compelling and relevant to the audience, it won't reach its potential," says Dean.

Walters couldn't agree more. "While customers assume that a business has a website—even a basic one with directions, hours of operation and a picture—you need to focus on the communications side of the net. By doing so, you will produce three times the results," Walters says.

Your Web address should appear beside your logo on packaging, advertising, catalogs, and all company

The screenshot shows the Collectors Gallery website. The header includes the site name and navigation links like 'About Us', 'Customer Service', 'Product Lines', and 'Login'. A main banner features 'The Three Graces' by Giuseppe Armani. Below the banner, there are sections for 'Welcome to Collectors Gallery', 'Product Lines Available Online' (listing various categories like Bags, Backpacks, etc.), and 'Product Line News'. A sidebar on the right contains 'Featured Items' and a 'Mailing List' sign-up form. The footer includes contact information for Collectors Gallery.

Kevin Hauge, marketing director for Collectors Gallery, says he finds it hard to believe that there are still businesses without a website.

The advertisement for the Gift & Home Channel features the logo and tagline 'helping retailers grow'. The main headline reads 'Treasure Hunt Previews The Hottest New Products You'll Be Seeing At The Winter Markets.' Below this, it says 'Tune into the Gift & Home Channel and watch Treasure Hunts with your host John Saxtan.' The website URL www.giftandhomechannel.com is prominently displayed. A screenshot of the website shows a 'Treasure Hunt' segment with John Saxtan. The ad also includes a 'Win a Free Store Makeover' promotion and a 'Giftware News' section. At the bottom, it encourages visitors to see hot new products at www.giftandhomechannel.com, www.giftwarenews.com, www.babyandkids.biz, and www.homefashionmag.biz.

The Giftware News editorial team searches shows, showrooms and suppliers for the hottest new products to be presented at the Winter shows. You'll see the items, get editors thoughts on what makes them unique and get all of the supplier information you need to buy.

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