

Building a Web Site

Low-cost programs and a little savvy help get the job done

by Mark Coleman

It wasn't long ago that small-business owners had to decide if they should have a Web site. There's no doubt about that now — the expectation is that all businesses have one.

Just having a Web site does not guarantee customers, however. A successful site needs to be built around clearly defined goals, it has to reach the target market, and it has to be designed so that site visitors can easily determine what services your company offers and what region it serves. This may sound intimidating to anyone whose computer experience is limited to a few programs, Web browsing, and e-mail. But with the resources currently available online, building a Web site is not ter-

ribly difficult. This article will walk you through the basics and provide links to low-cost site-building resources. Even if you're going to hire someone to create your Web site, give this article a read. It will at least help you speak the same language as your designer.

The chief goal of small-business sites is to increase sales, and that goal can be broadly served in a number of ways. Do you want to attract new business? Show off an online portfolio of your work? Provide a portal that allows potential customers to contact you and lets you respond? Once you define the goals, developing a site to achieve them is a fairly straightforward process. I'll use a

site I'm building for a local contractor as an example. The goals for his site include driving leads, but he also wants to provide a portfolio to inspire clients and show off completed work.

Domain Name and Web Host

The first step in developing a Web site is to choose and register a domain, also known as a URL or Internet address. The URL should reflect your company's name as closely as possible and be followed by a suffix. The most common suffix for a business is .com, but .net and .biz are both acceptable. You've probably seen other suffixes, such as .org, .gov, or .mil. Those indicate that the site belongs to, respectively, an organization, a government entity, or the military.

Registering a domain name is pretty simple. Go to a Web hosting company (see chart, left) and follow the directions on the site. Most, if not all, hosting service providers are domain registrars too, meaning that you can purchase your domain through them (most also provide site-building software — more on that later). They're responsible for setting up and maintaining domains on the Web so that someone typing www.abc.com actually gets to that site.

Web Hosts

Most Web hosting companies offer a similar range of services, including domain registration and site-building software. Visit several to compare costs and get a feel for what their software will be like to work with.

Hosting Service Provider	Free Domain Registration	E-mail	Max. Pages	Site Building Tools	24/7 Support
www.godaddy.com	no (\$1.99)	yes	5	WebSite Tonight (fee)	yes
www.aplus.net	yes	yes	5	Website Creator	yes
www.1and1.com	yes	yes	5	1and1 WebsiteBuilder	yes
www.powweb.com	yes	yes	9	Built into PowWeb service	yes
www.valuweb.com	yes	yes	10	SiteBuilder	yes

Domain Hosting Options

BASIC

Domain registration Most hosts offer free domain registration with a hosting plan.

E-mail This will allow you to have an e-mail address with your business domain, like email@jcm-construction.com. If you want each of your employees to have an e-mail address, find out how many e-mail addresses the host allows.

24/7 support This is most important to consider when you are first starting out and will tend to have questions. I have found Godaddy to have extremely good customer service.

Web analytics What reporting of Web site statistics is offered? You may want to know, for instance, how many visitors you get, how often they come back, or how many times a page is viewed.

Number of pages Most basic plans include five pages — usually sufficient for a basic site — and some go up to 10. If you plan a larger site or an image gallery, then you will need more pages.

ADVANCED

Photo gallery This is a place for users to browse your photos.

Blogs You can post daily updates, and site users can respond.

Streaming media You'll need this if you intend to include videos on your Web site.

Marketing tools These include ads that you pay for on search engines such as Google, MSN, and the like, and e-mail marketing programs.

Shopping cart If you plan to sell directly from your site, you will need a shopping cart.

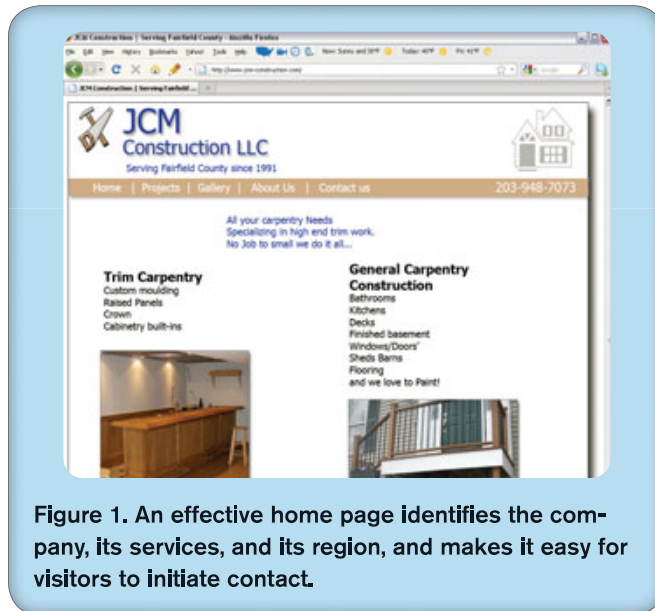


Figure 1. An effective home page identifies the company, its services, and its region, and makes it easy for visitors to initiate contact.

When you register your domain name, you'll need to enter your desired URL. The hosting company will search to be sure it's not in use already; each URL is unique, and there can't be two www.abc.com URLs. All domain registration companies provide a list of alternatives if your first choice is taken. You can also try .net or .biz instead of .com.

You might not get exactly what you want. The name of the company I'm building a Web site for is JCM Construction (**Figure 1**). When I went to register the domain I wanted, www.jcmconstruction.com, it was taken. I considered using .net but decided on www.jcm-construction.com. Using punctuation, such as the hyphen in my example, would have been considered bad practice in the early days of the Internet. But with so many domains out there now, it can sometimes be the best choice.

Next, I recommend opting for private domain registration, to keep your personal information confidential. Most hosts offer this for a minimal fee. If you don't choose this option, anyone who goes to www.whois.com can find your name, address, phone number, and e-mail.

The two main costs associated with maintaining a Web site are a yearly fee for domain registration and a monthly hosting fee. Costs vary based on the options you choose and can run from a few dollars a month to several hundred. Most of the time, a less expensive "personal" plan, rather than a "business" or "enterprise" plan, will work for a small business.

Definitions

DOMAIN REGISTRAR

An organization accredited to reserve or register Internet domain names.

HYPERLINK

A document that the reader can click on and follow, or that is followed automatically.

ISP (INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDER)

A company that offers its customers access to the Internet.

SEM (SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING)

A form of Internet marketing that seeks to promote Web sites by increasing their visibility in search engine result pages (SERPs) through the use of paid placement.

SEO (SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION)

The process of improving the volume or quality of traffic to a Web site from search engines.

TRAFFIC

The visitors to a Web site; measured both by the number of visitors and the number of pages they visit.

URL

Uniform Resource Locator, or the Internet address of a Web site.

WEB CRAWLER/SPIDER/ROBOT

A computer program that browses the World Wide Web in a methodical, automated manner, also called an automatic indexer or bot.

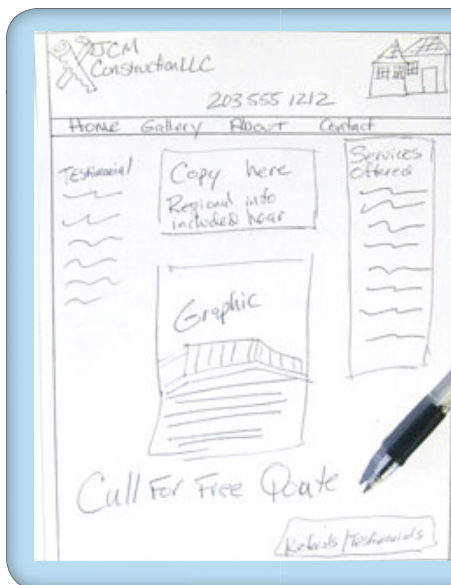


Figure 2. The author suggests sketching out a Web site design on paper first, showing the logo, the navigation “buttons” (Home, About, Gallery, and Contact), and a basic layout.

Additional features can often be purchased a la carte.

One consideration is your computer savvy. Do you have design skills? Do you know HTML? If you don’t, you can use the simplified site-building tools that most hosting providers offer. It’s worth the time to check out several. Most providers offer a similar set of services, but all have variations, and some charge for certain tools.

Site Design

When you sit down to create your Web site, sketch out the basics on a piece of paper (**Figure 2**). Show the logo, the navigation (buttons such as Home, About, Gallery, and Contact that guide visitors through the site), and a basic layout. Do this for every page. Then assemble all the raw materials — such as a logo, photos, text and captions, and videos — that will go on the site. These will need to be in an electronic format that can be dropped into whatever site-building software your host provides.

Design should focus on the goals you established. Most of the time, the chief goal is to drive leads that convert to sales. Keep the design clean and simple. The easier you make it for a site visitor to find out about the services you offer, the more likely you are to generate a lead from that visitor. Have strong “calls to action.” One example is a prominent text box that says “Call now for a free quote.” And put your phone number right up front. On the home page (the one where a site visitor first lands), describe what you do, what region you service, and your overall business philosophy. Be descriptive, but keep it short.

How many pages do you want? What are the pages? On the JCM Construction site, I wanted a home page, a gallery, an “about this company” page, and a contact page. Including testimonials on a Web site is good, but keep them short and to the point, so they might actually get read. I like to include one or two on every page,

Get Your URL Out There

Put your URL on your truck, company shirts, business cards, and especially on any marketing brochures you might have. Include it in the signature line in your e-mail communications. The more you get it out in front of people, the more traffic you will drive to your site.

Logo Design

If you don't have a logo or the skill set to create one (or maybe you just need yours put in a digital version), online resources can take care of those problems. One excellent, low-cost service I've used is www.crowdspring.com. To use Crowdspring, you provide the concept you want in a design — anything from a simple logo to whole corporate branding. You state what you're willing to pay and assign a deadline. Designers sign up for your project and in a very short time, you will start receiving samples. The more information you provide, the faster you'll receive a design that meets your goals. When you select and pay for the design, you'll receive a digital version you can use for your Web site, your business cards, and your letterhead.

with a full page that shows most, if not all, of them.

Once you've defined the goals of your site, done a rough design, and gathered the components, it's time to sit down with the Web site-building tools from your provider. Most of the ones I've worked with let you pick a general theme that defines the colors, type styles, and basic layout of the site, which usually allows more than enough flexibility for a good design.

Google, Yahoo, Bing, Ask

A well-built site attracts search engines — such as Google, Yahoo,

Bing, and Ask — programs that look through Web sites in an effort to match their content to the keywords a user enters when initiating a search. They will be your main source of visitors, or traffic.

An entire industry is built around Search Engine Optimization, or SEO, which is loosely defined as building a Web site so that it is easily found and indexed by search engines. There's a lot more to SEO than can be said here, but armed with a basic understanding, you can apply the fundamentals that make SEO work and drive traffic to your site. SEO helps to build search-engine rank, which is the value that

search engines define for your Web site based on its content, keywords, and the number of links between your site and others (more is better). A better search-engine ranking gets your site higher up on the return list that search-engine users see.

Keywords are those words and phrases that potential customers are likely to use to search the Web for the services you offer. Think about the words people are most likely to use in searching for your business, then create copy based upon them. Examples might be “deck,” “composite decking,” “deck builder,” “ipe,” or “deck contractor.” Be sure to repeat the keywords to increase the chances that search engines will pick them up. My goal is for every page to have a 3 percent to 4 percent keyword density, meaning that for every 100 words, three or four are keywords.

It's also important to write clear, clean copy. Not only should it be search-engine friendly, it has to be easy for users to engage with. Poor copy loses visitors.

Every page on your site should be clearly titled, with your business name in the title. For example, if I were creating a page about a Trex deck that JCM Construction did, I would label the page [JCM-Construction.com/Trex Deck](http://JCM-Construction.com/TrexDeck). This gets the company

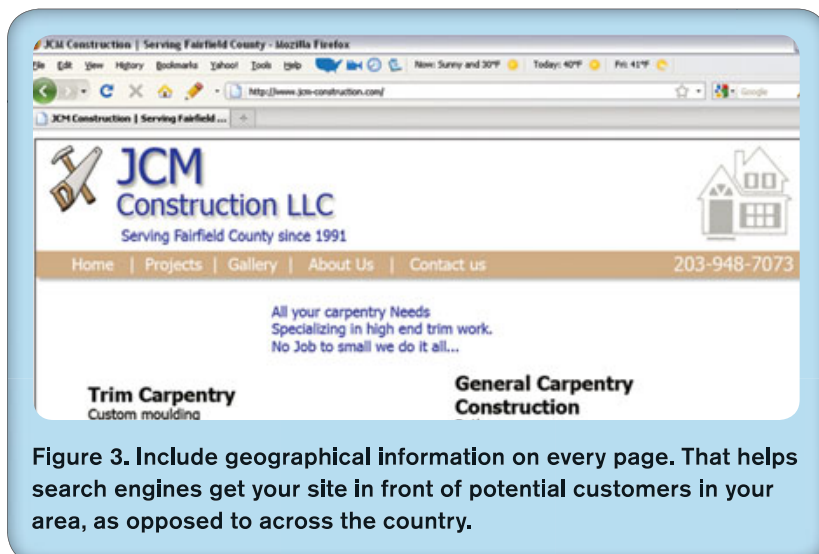


Figure 3. Include geographical information on every page. That helps search engines get your site in front of potential customers in your area, as opposed to across the country.

Web Analytics

You've built a great site with quality content and lots of keywords and links. What now? Your Web host should have what are called reporting tools. If it doesn't, sign up for a free Google analytics account. Web analytics is the measurement, collection, analysis, and reporting of information about activities on a Web site. That data can tell you how many people came to the site, how often they came back, how long they stayed, how many page views they generated, what sites link to yours, which search engines came to the site, and how frequently.

The main data points you want to know are page views (how many Web pages got viewed), site visitors (how many visitors, unique or in aggregate, came to the site), and site links (referring sites that link to yours). Site visits and page views should increase over time.

Analytics should help you get an understanding of which pages visitors look at and whether they're taking the actions you want them to. For example, if you want visitors to go from the home page to the contact page, but few are, then you should probably tweak the home page. Maybe the call to action isn't strong enough, or maybe the contact button isn't obvious.

It will take time for the search engines to find and index your site, so don't expect hundreds of visitors the day after you launch the site. About two months after going live, take a look at how many visitors you've had and where they've been going. If you aren't getting the results you hoped for, make some changes, give it some time, and check the numbers again.



name out there associated with a particular phrase.

Deck building is regional, so one top concern is to garner visitors where you work (**Figure 3, page 4**). What good does it do to have someone from California looking at your site if you build decks in Connecticut? State the region you serve in as many locations on your site as possible. Use different ways to describe your geographical target market. For example, JCM Construction mainly operates in Fairfield County, Conn., so I use copy such as "Serving the Fairfield County area since 1995" on the home page. On the contact page, I include JCM Construction's hometown and state.

Link your site to the manufacturers, suppliers, and subcontractors you do business with and encourage them to link back to you. This "link exchange" provides SEO value and will help your site develop a higher search-engine rank. If you have other sites or blogs, link them to your site. The more incoming links, the better.

Don't let your site remain the same year after year or even month after month. The more frequently you add or change the content, the more search engines will take notice. This in turn will help build your ranking, which will ultimately lead to more visitors you can convert to sales. Most small-business Web sites don't generate thousands of visitors a month. More likely, the number is in the hundreds. But if you can convert even 1 percent into sales, you will have paid for your site. ❖

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