



WHAT DOES YOUR WEBSITE SAY ABOUT YOUR BUSINESS?

Q: My business is very small, just me and two employees, and our product really can't be sold online. Do I really need a website? -- Robin C. A: Congratulations, Robin, you are the one millionth person to ask me that question. Smile for the cameras, brush the streamers and confetti from your hair and listen closely, because I'm about to answer for the millionth time what has become one of the most important and often-asked questions of the digital business age. Before I answer, however, let's flash back to the very first time I was asked this question. It was circa 1998, during the toddler years of the Internet, just after Al Gore laid claim to having given birth to the concept a few short years before. I was giving a speech on the impact of the Internet on small business at an association luncheon in Montgomery, Alabama. My motto then was: Feed me and I will speak. I have the same motto today, but I now expect dessert to be included in exchange for the sharing of my vast wisdom. In 1998, which was decades ago in Internet years, the future of electronic commerce or "ecommerce" as it's come to be known, was anybody's guess, but even the most negative futurists agreed that all the signs indicated that a large portion of future business revenues would be derived from online transactions, or from offline transactions that were the result of online marketing efforts. So, Robin, should your business have a website, even if your business is small and sells products or services that you don't think can be sold online? My answer in 1998 is the same as my answer today: Yes, if you have a business, you should have a website. Period. No question. Without a doubt. Thank you, drive through. Now serving customer number one million and one... Also, don't be so quick to dismiss your product as one that can't be sold online. Nowadays there is very little that can not be sold over the Internet. More than 20 million shoppers are now online, purchasing everything from books to computers to cars to real estate to jet airplanes to natural gas to you name it. If you can imagine it, someone will figure out how to sell it online. Internet marketing research firms predict that online revenues will range between \$180 and \$200 billion dollars in 2003. They also predict that the number of online consumers will grow at a rate of 30-50% over the next few years. These numbers alone should be enough to convince you that your business should have a website. Let me clarify one point: I am not saying that you should put all your efforts into selling your wares over the Internet, though if your product lends itself to easy online sales, you certainly should be considering it. The point to be made here is that you should at the very least have a presence on the World Wide Web so that customers, potential employees, business partners, and perhaps even investors can quickly and easily find out more about your business and the products or services you have to offer. That said, it's not enough that you just have a website. You must have a professional looking website if you want to be taken seriously. Since many consumers now search for information online prior to making a purchase at a brick and mortar store, your website may be the first chance you have at making a good impression on a potential buyer. If your website looks like it was designed by a barrel of colorblind monkeys, your chance at making a good first impression will be lost. One of the great things about the Internet is that it has leveled the playing field when it comes to competing with the big boys. As mentioned, you have one shot at making a good first impression and with a well-designed website, your little operation can project the image and professionalism of a much larger company. The inverse is also true. I've seen many big company websites that were so badly designed and hard to navigate that they completely lacked professionalism and credibility. Good for you, too bad for them. You also mention that yours is a small operation, but when it comes to benefiting from a website, size does not matter. I don't care if you are a one-man show or a ten thousand employee corporate giant; if you do not have a website you are losing business to other companies that do. Here's the exception to my rule: It's actually better to have no website at all than to have one that makes your business look bad. Your website speaks volumes about your business. It either says, "Hey, look, we take our business so seriously that we have created this wonderful website for our customers!" or it says, "Hey, look, I let my ten-year old nephew design my site! Good luck finding anything!" What does your website say about your business? Here's to your success.

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