

Ask SCORE

I've operated a septic cleaning service for three years and done reasonably well. I've begun to think that the business might benefit from having a website, but I'm not sure where to start. Can you give me some basic guidelines to get me going in the right direction?

Today, the importance of business cards and brochures are just as important as having a company website. Websites provide a simple and easily accessible source of information about your business's products and services. In fact, they are commonly the centerpiece of many companies' marketing programs.

But image is certainly not everything when it comes to setting up and maintaining a successful website for your business. As consumers have become more comfortable with online shopping, their expectations about a website's informational value and functionality have increased as well. Small businesses that don't deliver higher levels of Web sophistication risk being left behind.

A good starting point is avoiding errors that often doom websites to mediocrity. It's not a matter of making your site complicated. Today, the "less is more" axiom applies and often spells the difference between a website that delivers for your small business, and one that doesn't.

Don't neglect your site. If you want the Internet to help build your business, make your website a top priority in your daily operations. If your products, services, prices, location, hours, contact information and marketing messages change, make the updates immediately. Outdated information frustrates customers. Place your contact information in a prominent location. Many potential customers visit websites merely for basic contact details.

Flashing images, scrolling text and blinking buttons may have seemed clever and high-tech when first introduced, but now they are simply annoying. Dump them in favor of graphics that enhance your site's usability and professional image. Avoid the temptation of cute bells and whistles. Make a fast-loading site a top priority.

Don't assume that is performing the way you want or expect it to. Usage and activity can help you make adjustments to meet your customers' needs and expectations. Sources such as WebTrends.com and SiteCatalyst.com offer simple, inexpensive tools for tracking activity and identifying areas in need of improvement.

This column is brought to you by the Southern New Hampshire Chapter of SCORE, with more than 70 current and former business executives available to provide free, confidential, one-on-one business mentoring and training workshops for area businesses. Call 603-666-7561 or visit www.score-manchester.org for information on mentoring, upcoming workshops and volunteer opportunities. SCORE is a national, non-profit organization and a resource partner of the U. S. Small Business Administration.

Have a question you'd like answered in this column? E-mail it to info@score-manchester.org, with "Ask SCORE" in the subject line.