

It's the continuing hype, propounded by government, business advisors, and the media, that you can't call yourself a business unless you have a website. And of course, after the collapse of the IT market following the millennia, there is no end of former IT professionals wanting to sell you a site for a few hundred pounds or so. It's not surprising then, under this continual pressure of opinion, that you fork out £500 to £750 for, if you're lucky, a good looking website saying what you do, who you are, and how to contact you; maybe with the dubious luxury of search engine positioning thrown in for the price. And of course new business begins flying through your door!

Reality is rather more mundane for most small businesses. If I want a plumber or electrician I'll probably ask friends for a recommendation, or spend 10 minutes looking through the Yellow Pages and ringing people up to come and quote, rather than searching for someone on the Web. Even with broadband connections, searching for such information on even the best Web search engines such as Google will take me longer, and the end result will usually tell me less about the potential quality of the company I'll select than I'd work out from 5 minutes listening to how they describe themselves in a phone call. That's unless you are of the belief that when you see a well-presented, glossy website it must mean that you've found a clearly first class company - if you do, can I suggest several UFO discussion groups you might find interesting in looking at as well. If it is a glossy website, full of brilliant photographs and customer quotes, its worth asking yourself how this first class plumber, electrician or builder had all that time to sit down with a web designer and describe the website you're looking at. In my experience, the best tradesmen don't have the time for all that as they are in too much demand through word-of-mouth referrals in the first place.

Critics of my previous example will berate me for not pointing out how a good website can give the potential customer so more information about the specific skills of a particular tradesman or company. They'd contend that such sites, well indexed on search engines, can rapidly narrow down your search for specialist skills - something you'll find hard to do with Yellow Pages. I concede the point, but simply counter that such websites are rare because few web designers have the business analysis skills to translate what makes a business or tradesman special into a well targeted, user friendly website. Too much competition in the web design marketplace has resulted in barely viable pricing, which has inevitably forced web designers to go for volume of sites produced rather than concentrating in producing quality, business focused sites. This, together with that lack of business analysis skills, means that all too often the web designers fail to make the connection between the tradesman's skills and the customer's requirements; often quite simply by using the tradesman or business's own jargon on the website without thinking of how the customer refers to their requirements, particularly when searching on the web. It's a key to good business analysis - understanding both sides of the language of the business; how the business thinks of what it does and how the customer thinks of what they need, then connecting the two together.

So if you are a tradesman offering general skills, or a small business such as a butcher, bakery, newsagent, or alike, would I sell you a website? Much as I would really like to have a tax bill to pay next quarter - no. I'd prefer to be different from the pack wolves of my industry and suggest we go and have a few pints at the pub instead (at your expense) and save you the money.

Doesn't sound like I'll stay in business for long? Well I'm not saying the web is worthless to all businesses, its just a waste of money for many who are seduced or nagged into buying the simple 'advertising hoarding' style websites which clutter up the web search engines, and all too often look

just as tacky! Websites should earn their keep or like any failed promotional vehicle be written off and marked down to experience.

So when do you have a website for your business? Simple - when it serves your customers. It should earn its presence on your books by saving you time and keeping your customers happy. The best sites are those that give your customers access to what they need, but don't involve you in costly administration. Such sites benefit you by concentrating you and your staff's time on the core of your business, and satisfy your customers by giving them instant access to what they need from you. Any good examples? Yes, many. I'd single out:

- Online product selling (eCommerce or not) which lets the customer quickly order what they need when they know what they are looking for, and if they're unsure, give them the right product information and comparisons to make their choices quickly and surely.
- Booking systems which let you identify what you need, check its availability, and reserve or book it all with a few mouse clicks. Whether it's a ticket to a show, a hire car or cab, or an appointment for a bit of hair restyling, booking systems, whether they use online payment or simply telephone confirmed reservations, can really make life easier for customer and supplier alike. I'm still hoping to hear from a plumber or electrician one day wanting a website who's willing to have an online booking system - that one I won't turn away (I'm not saying I believe it would make them turn up on time mind you!)
- Tracking systems that tell you what's going on. I hate being on the end of enquiry lines, listening to seemingly endless lists of options I have to press keys to select from, or holding in a call waiting queue for 'the next available customer representative' listening to horrific electronic music or irritating radio shows. I will happily transfer my custom to any company that offers a website I can log onto to see my order status and account details - unless of course they start blasting horrible music out of my speakers.

These are the type of websites worth paying to have built for your business. The ones that sell directly, save you handling time consuming repeat enquiries for the same information, or make it easier for potential customers to find the specialist services you sell. Even more important, they are the type of websites that keep your existing customers coming back to you - they strengthen your relationship with your customer making it harder for them to want to go anywhere else even when there is a price difference. Such sites cost more to build for sure, and they require better skilled web developers to do the building. Even a straightforward online selling site will cost more if its to be done well, but it will earn its way. 'Advertising Hoarding' sites? - no more please - we have enough junk on the web as it is.