Enterprising Rural Families^{TM}

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TIP OF THE MONTH:

KEEP YOUR BUSINESS ON TRACK

1. **Have a clearly articulated mission statement.** A clear statement to deal with each issue will point everyone in the same direction. E.g., "We need to reduce the cost of shipping orders by 50% by July 1st, while ensuring that the orders are delivered promptly—100% of the time."

2. **Have a consistent understanding of the problem.** Some may not identify or see the same problem or issue. Some may resist change. Getting everyone to work on the mission statement will help forge a common vision.

3. **Make sure your problem is the most pressing to solve.** Money, time and staff limit the number of problems you can tackle at any one time. Be sure you pick the most critical first. Periodically review the list.

4. **Keep your mission statement prominently displayed.** Be sure all staff members have a copy; enlarge and post it. Remind everyone at each meeting and as often as needed.

5. **Don't be afraid to change the mission.** Situations change - change your mission statement accordingly.

Is Your Website Ruining Your Business?!?

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The search is on…
Over the weekend, I was doing some on-line "surfing." I was interested in an upcoming community event I've heard advertised on our local radio station. Since the event is sponsored and hosted by one of our community's small businesses, I searched for the business' website for more information.

I navigated my way to their home page. It was visually appealing, albeit sparse – a paragraph or so of text, a phone number and address, and a couple of photos. Since the home page didn't contain any information on the event of interest to me, I found a link to the "Upcoming Events" page on the tool bar and clicked on it. This page gave me a list of "new and exciting" things happening at the business for the summer.
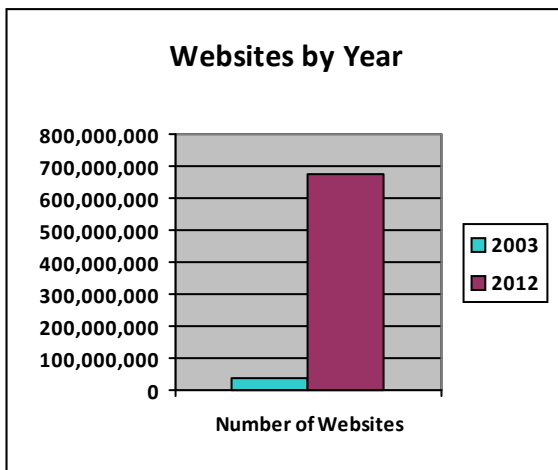
The summer of 2007, that is. Ugh!

Frustrated and disappointed, I navigated back to the home page where the business stated that the last update to their website had occurred in April 2007 … five years ago. Double Ugh!

This experience made me realize that for small businesses, websites can be both a blessing and a curse. The internet has become an overwhelmingly popular mode of sharing information, conducting sales, and creating market awareness for our increasingly web-savvy population. Yet, not every business needs a web presence – and for the ones that do, their needs are extremely unique.

The changing landscape of the World Wide Web
During the past 10 to 15 years, businesses and organizations have been urged to have a presence on the web, to claim their own slice of the internet pie. Rather than be left behind by this internet explosion, organizations and businesses both large and small created websites .

Websites by Year

800,000,000	
700,000,000	
600,000,000	
500,000,000	☐ 2003
400,000,000	☐ 2012
300,000,000	
200,000,000	
100,000,000	
0	

Number of Websites

Netcraft, an internet services company in England, attempts to conduct a "count" of active websites each month. While not a perfect science, their estimates are some of the most reliable and trusted in the on-line industry. When they began conducting their monthly count in April, 2003 they logged just over 40 million websites on the World Wide Web. In April 2012, that number rose to 676.9 million – a seventeen-fold increase in less than a decade!

Early in the on-line era, simple and user-friendly web design programs were readily available, web hosting services were very inexpensive, and virtually anyone could quickly and easily create a website, or hire someone to do it at a minimal expense.

And then, as appears to be the case with the business I encountered this weekend, another phenomenon occurred: after the website was created, it was forgotten. Simply having a website was a feat for many small businesses. Once it went "live", the founder or tech guru checked the item off his or her to-do list and moved on to the myriad of important tasks of growing and sustaining the business, leaving the website somewhat ignored.

Is something better than nothing?
Most businesses are pushed to have a website, to simply "get in the game" of the internet experience. Is simply having a web presence good business? As a general rule, if you don't have a website you're likely losing business to other companies that do. Over 20 million people use the internet *each day* to purchase almost anything, from land and livestock to seedlings and soap. And even if your business isn't selling on the internet, people are doing product research, comparison shopping, and simply 'browsing' on the web – all of which will influence their purchasing decisions in the near or long term.

However, as the case with most rules, there is an important exception to the "any website is good for business" mantra: it's actually better NOT to have a website than to have one that makes your business look bad. Your website speaks volumes about your business, not just to your potential customers but to your partners, potential investors, and even your future employees.

Your website can say you are conscientious about the way you do business, you take the time and care required to project a polished public image, and that you care about how the general public views your place of business. If you have an outdated or nonfunctioning website, your website says that you jumped into a project without considering the time and effort it might take to do it well, that you may not care about your public image, and that customer service to internet users might not be your top priority.

Which message would YOU rather send to the person that searches out or stumbles upon your business via your website? If you can't guarantee that a positive and polished image of your business can be maintained through your website, "nothing" truly might be better than a poorly-executed "something".

Decisions, decisions
If you've made the decision to have a website, what's next? Whether you are entering the World Wide Web for the first time, or you need to do an update or an overhaul of your existing site, there are some questions to consider before creating or revising your business web site. The following questions, offered by the Market Research Center with the University of Wyoming's Small Business Development Center, are just a few to consider:
- **What is the purpose of your website?** Or, a similar question to ask might be, *"What do you hope people will DO as a result of visiting your website?"* Maybe you hope your website will help sell your product, increase traffic in your physical store front, generate leads for new distributors, or increase

paid subscribers to your service. The purpose or goal of your website must be top-of-mind before you go any further in creating or re-vamping your site.

- **What information will be available on your website?** A business history, owner or family profile, product catalog, newsletter, calendar of events, map to your physical location, shopping cart, or photo gallery are just a few of the items you might make available on your website. Depending on how you answer the first question on the purpose of your website, you will be better equipped to consider what information you need.
- **What are your customers' problems or needs?** Try to climb into the shoes of your customers and anticipate what they will need and expect when visiting your website. Or, better yet – ask them! Find a trusted customer or someone who fits the profile of your desired consumer and ask them about how they might use your website. Their responses might surprise you and offer insights that you would never come to on your own.
- **How will you know if your website is successful?** After you've done the hard work of answering these questions, your work isn't over! Measuring the success of your website and monitoring the right benchmarks is your final step. Your website is an investment, not just of money but of time and energy as well. Any small business owner knows that measuring the return on an investment is critical. If your website is intended to be informational, the number of views and time a visitor to your site spends on each page may be of prime interest to you. Or, if your website is intended to draw more people to your physical location, you may want to count foot traffic and find a way to measure how people heard about your business.

> ## Website Questions to Consider
> *(adapted from the University of Wyoming Market Research Center):*
>
> What is the purpose of your website?
>
> What information will be available on your website?
>
> What are your customers' problems or needs?
>
> How will you know if your website is successful?

Once you've considered these questions, take a good hard look at your website (if you have one) so you'll know what kind of development or revision is necessary. Visit the websites of similar, and even competing, businesses and ask yourself some more questions: *What do you like about their site? What makes them appealing to you? What would you change to make it better or different for your business?*

Consider what ongoing resources you'll need to keep up the website and who will be responsible for its maintenance into the future. How much time and energy must be put forth to keep the site maintained? If you aren't interested in monthly, quarterly, or even annual updates to the services, product information, or events you include on your website, keep that in mind – it will be important when you are deciding what to include in your site. Thoughtfully designing a website, then failing to consider its' upkeep and maintenance, might only get you back to "square one" on your website journey.

Based on all of the information you've collected, you may decide to develop a website on your own, enlist the help of a tech-savvy employee, friend, or family member, or hire a professional web developer. Whether you're a do-it-yourselfer or hiring someone else for the job, you need to have a clear sense of your expectations and parameters before it is created.

W**ebsites: The "right" tool for small business**
Tim Knox, writer for Entrepreneur magazine and blog, extols the opportunities for small businesses to *"…level the playing field when it comes to competing with the big boys"* by maximizing your place on the internet. With a well-designed and up-to-date website, a small operation can project the same image of professionalism and credibility of a much larger company.

When it comes to your website, you may or may not be selling your product or service directly to your customer. But, regardless of the type of site you have, you are selling something FAR more important over the internet: your business' credibility. Let your customers see who you *really* are by having a website that reflects your business as accurately and professionally as possible.

Resources:

- Netcraft: https://news.netcraft.com
- University of Wyoming Market Research Center: http://www.wyomingentrepreneur.biz/
- Tim Knox, Entrepreneur Magazine On-line. October 27, 2004: *"Why you need a website."* http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/65204

CHECK, AND DOUBLE CHECK

It's important to check and test your Website to help ensure that it looks great and works beautifully regardless of the browser or platform used. Testing a website before launch is one thing that you cannot afford to take lightly. Just like a minor negligence in construction planning can be disastrous, in the same way, a small error left unnoticed can prove to be fatal for your website.

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