
10 Tips for Small Business Web Sites

1) Have an Instant Home Page

Are you aware of the power of first impressions?

When you meet someone new, they start sizing you up in the first 10 seconds. They instantly judge your personality and whether or not to engage in conversation.

Don't think that your small business web site is any different.

Why is it then that most home pages take LONGER than 10 seconds to load? If that's the amount of time that it takes for a web surfer to form an impression of your business, they will be long gone before they learn anything about you.

What's the immediate impression of a slow-loading page?

Here are a few:

- Not enough time and money was spent (cheap)
- Home page cluttered with information (disorganized)
- Massive graphics (focus on style over content)

You see where I am going with this. Do you really want the first impression someone gets of your business to be cheap, disorganized and content-free? Probably not.

Here's the solution: make your home page lightning fast. Pare it down to it's bare essentials. Tell the story of your business in as few words and graphics as possible.

The benefits:

- New customers evaluating your business won't have to wait
- Your mission and services will be readily apparent to anyone
- A new visitor will not feel overwhelmed with information

Anyone who has had to wait around for a sluggish page to load will be instantly and immediately thankful that yours does not. They also get an immediate impression of your business and can make the decision to find out more.

First impressions count. Make sure the home page of your small business web site leads with a nice smile and a firm handshake.

2) Simplify Your Copy

People read web pages the same way they read the newspaper.

They scan the headlines, skim for interesting news and move on to the next topic. What does this mean for your small business web site?

Have great headlines and tell your story in as few words as possible. Use bold text, bullets and callouts to highlight important points.

Do not write a dissertation about your business. People won't read it. Really.

If you feel you have to spend some time explaining the benefits of a service, or providing potential customers with more detailed information, don't do it all at once.

Break up the information over several pages. Make it clear to the reader before they get to a page that it contains a lot of text. Don't subject everyone to it. Reserve it for the people who WANT to read it.

New visitors will be able to skim your site. They will quickly find the information they are looking for. They may not decide that your business is right for them, but at least they did not waste time figuring it out.

3) Title Your Web Pages

The title of this document is "10 Tips for Small Business Web Sites." Would it have made sense to you if it was "Welcome to our site?"

Here's the surprising part: this is how most web pages are titled. Every single page of the site has the same generic title.

But is this really important? In case you are not aware, the title of a web page appears at very top of your web browser window. With an entire page of content to look at, does the title matter if no one notices it?

Yes, the title matters.

While the title may be obscure once someone is browsing your web site, it is sometimes the ONLY information they see about your site in a search engine.

Search engine results are made up of page titles. The page title is a link to your web site. Which link would you rather click on?

- Welcome to our site
- Our natural cotton robes offer warmth and comfort

In the second example, the title of the web page has been used to increase the number of potential visitors from a search engine.

Which leads us to our second point. Every page should have a different title.

Unless every page of your site is about exactly the same thing, different pages will list different benefits or services of your small business. Since each page is unique, each page title should be unique.

This gives you more search engine coverage, and creates more ways for web surfers to find and browse your web site.

4) Drive The User

Internet surfers are easily distracted.

And why not? The web is an interconnected network offering billions of information tidbits. Click one link and you're reading about photography. Click another, and you've moved on to a book review.

If your small business web site has a specific goal, each page of the site must nudge the viewer in the direction you want them to go.

Why every page? Because you never know how someone is going to find out about your small business web site, and which door they're going to come through.

Think of it this way: having a small business web site is nothing like owning a small store. With the store, there is only one entrance. If you're having a sale, you can put a sign in the window and be sure people will see it on their way in.

A web site is like a store with multiple doors on the front, back and sides. People can wander in from just about any direction. This means that you have to put up signs ALL OVER the place.

Once you've captured their attention, make sure the follow-through is effortless. If it's not, you're going to lose a lot of window shoppers.

For example, let's say that you are trying to increase subscriptions to your newsletter. You've done a good job of canvassing your site with links to the newsletter, but registration requires an e-mail address, name, address and phone number.

I am exaggerating, but you get the point. You would lose a lot of potential subscribers here.

To summarize: make your site single-minded in its intent. Keep reminding the viewer of what you'd like them to do next. Because once they get distracted, they may wander off, never to return.

5) Follow Design Conventions

Maybe you've seen this web site: the company logo drifts across a blank page. You have to click on the moving target to enter the site.

If not, you have seen something similar. There is no end to the number of sites that want to be "different." They want to break the mold and explore new boundaries.

That's all well and good if you're not trying to promote a business.

When you are, the easiest thing to do is to stick to well-established web site design conventions. It has to do with pattern recognition.

People who surf the Internet on a regular basis get used to seeing the same approach over and over: the company logo in the top left corner, navigation at the top or down the side of the page.

Most pages are divided into three distinct sections: header, body and footer.

People get used to seeing this design pattern. The more they see it, the easier it is for them to use. They immediately know where to look for pertinent information. Their brains are pre-programmed to understand how it works.

When you go against these conventions, you break the pattern. Visitors to your site have to figure out how you've arranged everything.

It's like taking someone used to driving on the right and making them drive on the left. It's an accident waiting to happen.

Remember, the Internet moves at lightning speed. When you confound your visitors with clever design and navigation, they don't stick around long to figure it out. Confusion leads to irritation, and that leads to departure.

Keep your web site visitors happy. Design your pages by following conventions, so anyone can view your site quickly and without effort.

6) Go Easy On The Graphics

When I first started making web pages, I wanted to use pictures. Lots of them.

This makes sense. The web started out purely as a text medium. There were no banners, stock photographs or detailed company logos. There was just text.

Gradually, the web evolved and suddenly you could build a page with beautiful colors and elegant photographs. It was a knee-jerk reaction to put as many graphics on the page as possible.

Boy did those pages look nice. And boy did they load SLOW.

Today the popular opinion is that everyone using the Internet has high-speed access. Modems are dead and DSL and Cable are the wave of the future. This may be, but there are some sites that are sluggish even with fast connections.

Here's the thing: people probably don't pay as much attention to your nice graphics as you'd like.

After all, they found your web site because of it's CONTENT. They have no idea what your site looks like before they click the link. It's the content of your site that is compelling.

If this is the case, then make sure the content of your web site has the upper hand. Include graphics where necessary to accent and enhance your content. Use them to illustrate an important point.

But don't get carried away. Keep them to a minimum so that your pages load 10 times faster than your competitor's. Visitors will be so happy about the speed of your site, they will probably forgive you if it doesn't look beautiful.

7) Provide Content

Wow. The previous section was a nice introduction to this topic.

Why is the content of your pages so important for the success of your small business web site? Because content is what drives people to your site.

Content is also what the search engines are looking for. Search engines (like Google and Yahoo and AskJeeves) are basically massive mindless content-gathering robots.

When a search engine detects a link to one of the pages on your site, it follows it. Once on the page, the search engine scours it for text. It ignores the pretty layout and all the nice graphics.

Let's work through an example here. Let's say you're promoting your small business selling custom rhinestone collars for Chihuahuas. Where I come up with these, I have no idea.

First, the page that doesn't work. Your entire page is filled with photographs of your glorious collars, but not an ounce of text about them. The search engine finds the page, decides there is no content, and moves on.

Now let's say that each collar is associated with a paragraph of text describing the materials you used and the quality craftsmanship. Plus abundant references to rhinestones and Chihuahuas.

NOW the search engine has something to chew on. So do the readers of your web site.

Find new ways to inject more content into your web pages. In keeping with tip number 2, don't get carried away, but make sure there is just enough text on the pages to make them interesting to those mindless content robots.

8) Open A Dialogue

What better way to keep in touch with your customers?

The web is a miracle of connectivity. It is now possible to make contact with people thousands of miles away in a matter of minutes.

Because of the wide reach of the web, it is sometimes hard to predict just where visitors will be coming from. Some will find your site through links, others will find you when they use a search engine.

Your Internet customers may span a wide variety of ages, religions, ethnicities and other demographics. The best way to tune your site to meet their needs is to hear from them directly.

There are several ways to do this: you can start a forum, essentially an online discussion group. You can have a weblog and allow visitors to post comments. You can include surveys and pop quizzes on your site.

Each one of these tools will bring you closer to your customers. Each one of them will provide you with valuable feedback about what they are looking for.

Each one will help you tune your small business web site to make it as efficient as it can be. When you know your customers, you can make sure that your web site instantly meets their needs.

9) Pick A Tone

Everyone loves a good story.

Generations of history have been passed down through storytelling. Stories are compelling and immediately engaging.

Your small business web site can be the story of you. Why you started it. Why you love it. Why you went through the blood, sweat and tears to make it a reality.

Your web site should have a tone, a voice. It should sound like a real human being, not some massive corporation. Your small business is personal and you empathize with the needs of your customers. Make it sound that way.

This approach is a breath of fresh air on the Internet.

Find just a small number of business web sites and read through them. Do they sound like a conversation with an old friend or a presentation in the corporate boardroom?

Which one would you rather participate in?

Even if you don't feel comfortable stamping your personality on the entire site, make sure that you include an "About Us" page. This page lets you completely express your personality and your passions.

Eventually, some new customers will be drawn to your business because they agree with your point of view. Your web site may be nice, but it's your story that is fascinating.

10) Research Your Keywords

Do you know what words others use to describe your business?

It's an important question, and directly affects how you should optimize your web site pages for the search engines.

How you think of your business and suppose people will find it is irrelevant. You have to determine how EVERYONE ELSE will try to find you.

Let's say that you run a small store selling a variety of fish for home aquariums.

You think of all the words that describe your business: fish food, fish for sale, aquariums, water purifiers, etc. Some of these words might be easy to optimize for, others might be difficult. A lot depends on the amount of competition for the phrase.

It's all well and good to optimize your site for the word "aquariums" but not if you are competing in the search results with 10,000,000 other web sites.

The trick is to delve deeper and find the keyword gems for your business. Let's say that you specialize in exotic fish, and have a large collection of "Pomacanthus xanthometapon". I doubt you would have a lot of competition for that phrase.

There is, of course, a catch. Virtually no one will be searching for that term (hence the small amount of competition for it). The good news is that the few that do will be highly targeted customers, as compared to anyone who just searches for "fish."

So how do you find the keywords that describe your business, have minimal competition, and draw in a fair number of clicks each month?

A quick way is to run a Google Adwords campaign for a couple of months across a wide variety of keywords. As web surfers click on your ads, you will be able to keep track of which words they use the most.

Once you find a keyword or phrase that yields an exceptionally high number of clicks, investigate the competition for that word. If you find that there is moderate to low competition, this might be a good word or phrase to optimize for.

The Google Adwords approach will yield you quick results, but might cost a fair amount of money.

If you want to spend less, are more patient and have the time, you can create content-rich web pages that describe your business. Going back to our example, you would create a detailed page of information about each fish in your store.

Your information web site pages will cover a lot more ground than the pages that just sell fish. As time goes on, you can check the web logs for your site and see which common terms people use to find you.

Once you've found some good keywords and terms go back to your web pages. Optimize your pages for the keywords. Hopefully, you will see an improved traffic flow to your site.

About Triphase Media

We offer web site design and development services to small businesses. Our goal is to make your site fast, lean and attractive to the search engines. We apply a lot of what we've outlined in this document to every small business web site we develop.

We're located in the San Francisco Bay Area, but are happy to work on small business web projects no matter where your small business is located.

If you would like to find out more about our services, or would like a free consultation about your small business site, [contact us](#) or give us a call at **(510) 828-9541**.