




Almost Everything Communications

Creating and Launching a Small Business Web Site

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The outline presented here is not intended to record a specific process that Almost Everything Communications works through, but is an attempt to chart the general steps that just about all web site development goes through – even sites conceived and created by a single person.

If this looks like a lot, don't panic! You probably already have many of the materials this talks about, and many of the steps are quick and easy. Sites can be created that move through every one of these steps in just a day or two, and all but the largest, most sophisticated sites can move through them in just a week or two.

1. Chart out site content

- a. Consider the type of site that would work best for you:
 - i. Brochure site: information about your company to motivate people to contact you
 - ii. Commerce site: sales material with the opportunity to purchase products or services online
 - iii. Resource site: information about your company, plus materials and additional information that are valuable to your current customers as well as potential customers
 - iv. These are general fields, many sites will combine elements of each of them
- b. Work with your web designer to actually chart the site, deciding on the sections and pages that will need to be on the site.
- c. Also discuss with your web designer any special features or functions you will want on the site
 - i. Email response form, customer survey, ecommerce functions, etc.

2. Initial site design

- a. Find three or four web sites that you would like. Give the addresses to your web designer, along with a sentence or two saying what you like about each one.
- b. Provide logo or other branding materials you have to your web designer, along with any requests for design, color choice, etc. for your site.
- c. The web designer can now take your site outline, branding materials and list of sites you like and produce one or more "comps," usually graphic representations of proposed designs. You can give feedback on these comps, as well as select which one you would like to use.
- d. If you are using a template-based design, you only need to provide your branding materials and color choices and the particular template you would like to use.
- e. If you already have your domain name and/or hosting set up, provide that information to your web designer so that they can review the hosting service guidelines and policies. If you do not have your domain or hosting set up, your web designer can get it set up for you.

3. Create content

- a. While the designer is working on the graphic look of your site, you can begin working on the text and photo content of the site.
- b. This is often the most difficult and time-consuming part of the process.
 - i. If you already have print or other marketing materials, you can probably re-purpose that content for your web site.
 - ii. A Web site can be rolled out progressively. Prioritize the content for the site, concentrating on what must be ready for the site to go live. Let the web designer know what sections may be delayed in placing on the site.
- c. As you complete drafts of each part, have someone look at it and make comments. Your web designer may also offer to help you edit and focus your content.

4. Put the design and the content together

- a. Provide your final (initial) content to your web designer.
- b. The web designer can begin building the actual site pages and posting them to a “staging” area on your site for review. This staging area will not be viewable by the public and may actually be hosted on the web designers site and/or be password protected.
- c. Spend some time going over these staged pages to be sure the site design and content are working well together and that the image of your company you are trying to portray is coming through.
 - i. To identify a problem, be as precise as you can:
 - a. Provide the file name of the page on which you see the problem. This can be found in the “address” or “location” bar that appears near the top of the web browser window and shows the url address of the page (something like: “http://www.almost-everything.com/index.html”). You can click in this box and copy and paste the address in an email to your web designer.
 - b. Provide complete information about the fix.
 - i. If it’s a typo, identify the beginning of the paragraph and the words around the problem text.
 - ii. If it’s content change, identify exactly what needs to be changed and where. And be specific:
A request like: “all the prices should be \$19.95” is likely going to lead to trouble.
Better is: “prices for the Web Design Manual and Networking Primer should be \$19.95, with tax and shipping added.”
- d. Ask someone else to review the staged pages as well
- e. Now is the time to let your web designer know if the design is not working. It’s easier to make changes now than later. The earlier in the process that change requests are made, the better.

5. Final review and publishing

- a. As the designer gets more pages posted to the staging site, check the pages for errors or omissions.
 - i. When reporting problems/requesting changes, be sure to follow the instructions in #4c above.
- b. Ask someone else to review the site as well, also looking for errors.
- c. Your web designer should also be checking the site in a variety of browsers to be sure there won't be any problems for people using different browsers.
- c. When everything looks good, tell the web designer that it is OK to "go live" with the site.
- d. The designer will move the needed files to the proper place on your server and go through the site to be sure everything is working properly (links, scripts, etc.) and then set up the new home page as the page to be displayed when someone enters your URL.
- e. If this is a redesign of an existing site, it may be necessary for your web designer to edit certain web server files to be sure anybody attempting to view one of the old pages will be sent to the proper new page.

6. Publicizing

- a. Send email and/or printed materials to your contact list announcing the new site. You can include a link right in the email so that accessing the site will be quick and easy.
- b. Add your url to your business cards, letterhead, etc., and include it in an email signature that is appended to all of your work email messages.
- c. If you are concerned about having search engines return your site, be aware that this will require further investment, as most major search engines now require fees for including sites in their databases.
 - i. The optimization of a site for search engines requires special expertise and some amount of effort. Your web designer may charge extra for this optimization.
 - ii. It can take weeks for a site to actually be "found" by search engines (though paying fees usually speeds that up).

Look for our e-zine article revealing the secrets of search engine optimization and registration (coming soon).

7. Maintain the site

- a. Periodic maintenance will be required to ensure your site stays up to date.
- b. When requesting a minor update or change, be sure to follow the guidelines under item 4c above.
- c. Most web designers will provide some amount of support for quick changes (text changes, small corrections, etc.), but this may not include adding new pages and almost certainly does not include a significant change to the site structure or navigation. Talk to your designer about the particular change you are requesting to determine if there will be an additional charge, and if so how much it will be.
- d. Finally, if you have the time, you may want to consider learning how to maintain the site yourself. HTML is not a complicated language and you can be shown enough to enable you to make minor changes to the site in just a few hours.