

Your website is your business' front door

We use Google today just like we used the phone book years ago. In fact, anybody born from the late 1990s on only knows to use Google when looking up stuff (not that we even have phone books anymore).

Search on Google and you find websites!

Google pulls up two sources of information in response to your query—websites and different Google products, including Google My Business listings, and Google Maps. In other words, if you want your business to be found on Google, you need one or both of these (and you can't have a good Google My Business listing without a website).

It follows that if you want your business to succeed, you will have a findable, **updated**, easy-to-navigate website. If you want to really have success, you will also claim your Google My Business listing, and keep it **up to date**.



The information that absolutely must be current

It's absolutely essential that you keep your website and Google My Business listing current and up to date. If not, you might as well hope people still have that phone book handy so they can find your number.

There's no big mystery about what you need to keep tabs on: anything that impacts your customer's interaction with your business, including:

- Hours
- Location
- Contact information
- Team members/staff/leadership
- Services/products
- Pricing

If any of the above change, you must update your website. It really is that simple. If not, you risk alienating your

customers.

Not keeping up with your website is....not good

Just in the past couple of months, I've had two instances where websites were not updated with important information. When I looked up the massage therapist that I'd gone to a couple of years ago, her website appeared the same, as did her pricing. I went ahead and made an appointment, and it was only after I was ready to pay that I learned that her pricing had gone up by 10%. Yesterday, I looked up my hair salon's website to find the number to make an appointment. The website says that the salon is open seven days a week, but when I called yesterday (Monday), I got a recording informing me that the salon is closed on Mondays. Both of these experiences were annoying, but also avoidable had the business owners taken the time to update their websites.

Bottom line:

Keeping your website updated is a best practice for business. Not doing it can alienate customers.

Is your website undermining your credibility?

We are long past the time where having a website is optional for any type of organization. If you want business or support, you *need* a website, full stop.

But having any old website won't do. If you are a serious organization that is seriously looking to get donations, or to increase sales, or to advocate for a cause, or whatever your

raison d'être is, you have to have a **credible** website.

To make sure your website has credibility, there are three areas you must address:

Safety/security

Credible websites are first and foremost **safe and secure** to use. As I wrote before, you must have an SSL. You should also be hosted on a trustworthy web host. There are many shady (and many times, cheap) web hosts out there. If your site is hosted on a shady web host, you are in fact, guilty by association. This happened to me a few years ago, when my website was hosted on a large, inexpensive web host that also hosted spammers and other questionable organization. Because I was on a blacklisted server, my emails would not be accepted by Yahoo and who knows what other email services. I changed hosts, and the problem has been resolved.

Up-to-date

I just came across a Washington, DC public relations agency that supposedly hosts industry learning events on a regular basis. The website has a tab for these events, and when I clicked on it, it took me to an event that took place in March. I happen to know this agency is hosting an event in August, so it is very clear it has not updated the website in several months.

If you are wondering what you should be updating on a regular basis here's a non-comprehensive list: your blog, your events calendar, your personnel pages, your address, your social media links.

There is no excuse for not keeping your website up to date. If you use something like WordPress, updating is fairly simple. If you use something complex, you should have an IT person or a website developer who can do these things for you. And yes, it is worth the time or money investment because having an

outdated website showcases many negative traits: disinterest, laziness, not prioritizing the website (and by extension your audience).

Design and UX

If you were around in the 1990s when websites first started getting launched, you know what an old-fashioned website looks like. It's pretty ugly. If you have a 1990s design, you probably haven't kept up with the times. It's like sporting a feathered Farrah Fawcett hairdo from 1978, and it's now 2018.

Design is important, but so is user experience (UX). How easy is it for people to use your website and find what they need? If people are having trouble finding what they need, then they will not use your website and go elsewhere.

Don't undermine your organization's credibility. Give your website some attention right now!

Better safe than sorry (or why you need SSL)

Take a look at your browser right now. You should see that the web address starts with https, and that there is an icon to the left of that that shows a closed lock (and in Chrome, it says "secure"). This means that my website has its SSL certificate in order, and that this website is safe.

SSL stands for Secure Sockets Layer, and it is basically an authentication protocol that establishes a secure connection for your website.

It is better to be safe than sorry

By having that “secure” label, you are creating a safe experience for your readers/users. This helps build trust. But more importantly, starting this year, Google will penalize websites that don’t have the SSL certificate by labeling them as unsafe or “not secure.” Would you want to visit a site that is flagged as “not secure?” Probably not.

SSL certificates may be free with your hosting package

Getting SSL on your website should be a number one priority. If you (like me) manage your own website, check with your host. Most hosts provide free SSL certificates, and can deploy them on your site in a matter of minutes. Just give your website host a call, and follow instructions. If your host does not provide a free SSL certificate, there are plenty of places that will sell you one. Here’s a how-to guide on setting up SSL:
<https://sucuri.net/guides/how-to-install-ssl-certificate>

There may be a few more steps that you need to take to make sure your site is secure. In my case, the browser was telling me some images on my site were not secure. Thankfully, there was an easy and free fix in the form of a WordPress plugin. If you are using a site that is not WordPress based, you may have to check with a website developer to get some technical help.

Bottom line

In a world that has become rife with cybercrime, it is important to have provide a safe browsing experience. It is free to very low cost to deploy basic SSL on your website. And if you care about Google rankings, you need to do this now.

Two must-haves for your business website

I do a lot of research online, and I am definitely not alone. Most people conduct internet research on companies before they choose to do business with them. And this is the reason most organizations have websites, right?

And yet, how many times have you gone searching for something specific, found a few websites, visited them, only to find that few, if any, have the information you need?

Do you agree that the main point of your business website is to provide potential customers with information they need to make a buying decision? If you do agree, then you should have these two items on your business website:

1. Pricing

2. A real description of the company and its key personnel (aka “about” page)

Let's discuss each point.

Pricing information is necessary because cost matters in making buying decisions.

This is a no-brainer, or should be, and yet most consulting/service industries do not list prices on their website. For example, last month I was looking for a cleaning service. Since there are many in this area, reviews and referrals matter (you don't want a cleaning service that has a track record of breaking stuff or of not dusting your chandeliers), and so does cost. Some cleaning services I found listed specific pricing on their sites, but many did not.

Instead, some want you to call to get the estimate, and some want you to fill out online or email forms to provide you a quote.

By making pricing information difficult to obtain, you are losing potential customers. People have budgets in mind. They may be able to afford a monthly cleaning service of \$150, but not one that costs \$200. Why make those customers waste their time, *and yours*, by having a conversation about something that you can easily post on your website?

I know for many consultants there is a fear of pricing yourself out of a potential job. However, you know what you want to make from your work, don't you? Why would you want a client/customer that is not willing to pay what you think the value of your work is?

People do business with people, not with vague or non-existent descriptions

Just yesterday, I was checking out a website designer/developer's website, and guess what was missing? An "about" page. There was no bio on the designer, no information about when he started his company, or what his experience has been. Not. One. Word. Yes, he included a portfolio of websites that (supposedly) he has designed. But there is no clue as to what sort of person he is, how long he has been doing this work, and why he does it. In other words, by not having an about page, this designer left many questions about his own ability and experience unanswered. Perhaps the one question he did answer is his philosophy on openness and transparency (apparently, not a high priority). And this is yet another reason why you need an about page: you want to build trust and credibility by showing exactly who/what you are.

But an about page has to provide real information, not the generic and jargon-filled pile of words one finds on many websites. If you are wondering what to include on your about

page, think like a journalist. That is, try answering the 5Ws: why, where, when, who, what, and throw in the how too.

What kinds of information, beyond these two points, do you need in order to make a buying decision? Please let me know in the comments.

When you want to be found

Yesterday, I was browsing through books in my favorite used bookstore (where you can get most soft cover books for \$2 each, a real bargain, and most books are in great shape to boot). As I was making my way through the Fiction section, I came across Diane Ackerman's *The Zookeeper's Wife*, which is the *real* life story of a Polish woman who saved Jews during World War II, thus making it a non-fiction book. I came across a Denise Mina book that should've been housed in the Mystery section. I came across memoirs and biographies. In short, there were a lot of books that were not classified correctly and therefore shelved in the wrong place.



Bookstore picture courtesy of Kaboompics

Being in the wrong place makes it hard to be found.

The used bookstore is volunteer-run, and it may be too much to ask volunteers to know what each book is or where it belongs. Since books are donated, there is no inventory. On the other hand, in a regular bookstore, books are shelved by ISBN numbers and inventories are computerized. It'd be rare that book was shelved in the wrong place, unless a customer put it back where it didn't belong. If you were looking for a particular book, you could ask someone to look it up to see if it is available and if so, where it is located.

Classification is important, especially on the internet.

The internet is more like the used bookstore than it is like the organized world of Barnes & Noble. The internet is pretty much volunteer-run and the volunteers are each website's owners. In other words, on the internet you self-classify—you put yourself on the right (or wrong) shelf.

As the website owner or manager, you choose how you want your site to look, what content to include, and what keywords to use. You choose whether you will optimize your site to be found on search engines (SEO) and whether you will do it well (use the right tools, or hire a professional) or not.

When you want to be found, especially online, you have to know how to describe yourself and where people would look for you. You have to know how you are classified and what keywords people use to find you.

You must understand yourself and your market.

In the used bookstore, there are some volunteers who are avid readers, some who are aces at alphabetization and organization, and some who just want to help but have no clues. The volunteers who can alphabetize, organize *and* know books well are the ones who know the right place to shelve a book.

You have to understand exactly what to do, and how the world

classifies you. You may think that you do one thing (like Mattress Firm thinks it sells “sleep solutions”) while most customers see you differently (customers shop for mattresses not sleep solutions). It may be tempting to figure out some fancy description to help you stand out, but unless you classify yourself correctly and use the more common keywords searchers would use, you will not be found.

Don't be the memoir languishing in the fiction section. Classify your website correctly and use the right keywords.

4 lessons from WordCamp DC that will improve your website

This past weekend, I attended my sixth WordCamp (!). This time I only had to travel as far as Washington, D.C., which (finally) was hosting its first WordCamp. The past few times I've been to Baltimore and Philadelphia. In case you don't know, WordCamp is a volunteer-led conference featuring talks and workshops on various WordPress and website/blog related issues. Since this website/blog is built on WordPress, and WordPress is also a platform for so many other websites big and small, I find it extremely useful to learn more about WordPress and attend WordCamp.

This time, I made it to about 11 presentations out of a total 60. As usual, some of the presentations were really useful and/or interesting. Although I picked up several nuggets, I had four big take-aways.

Be generous

Have you ever clicked on a blog post that promised you some good information, but found out instead that the post was a sales pitch for the book/webinar/course where you could pay to access the information? I hate that and so does Tracy Schorn, who is the author of the very popular Chump Lady blog. Her main advice from “How to Build a Popular Blog and Master WordPress Even If You Are a Liberal Arts Major” is to be generous. Tracy says you should offer solutions, help people and be a resource for your readers.

Of course, Tracy works hard at her blog too. She writes a post every weekday, and answers her readers’ questions. Tracy is definitely on to something, as she is living the blogger’s dream. Her blog became so popular that she was able to write a book, get it published and then get it optioned for a TV series! Oh, and she makes money off her blog too.

Many ways to improve your SEO

John Victoria runs a SEO/digital marketing agency and his talk was “10 Reasons Why Your Site is Nowhere to be Found on Google (and what to do about it).” The answer to getting your site to be found on Google is SEO—search engine optimization. Being in the first page of Google’s organic search results is crucial if you want potential customers to find you.

Among his suggestions:

- Check your site loading speed—a slow load will turn off readers
- Submit your URL to Google
- Backlinks to your site matter. But, do not, under any circumstances, pay to get lots of backlinks to your site. Focus on quality not quantity.
- Submitting an article to a leading publication/site in your field is a great way to build quality backlinks and third-party credibility
- Use your keywords judiciously—do not keyword stuff and

think of other ways of saying the same thing (e.g., dentist, dental practice).

Take a step now toward enhanced website security

Websites get hacked all the time. Sometimes the hackers are trying to make money by redirecting your traffic to another site. Sometimes they are trying to spread malware. Whatever the reason, this is something you, as a website/blog owner, need to work hard to avoid. And it does take work and know-how. According to Adam Warner of SiteLock, from his talk “5 Steps to Personal and Website Security,” even taking one step helps. Some of what he recommended:

- Have strong passwords, do not repeat them and consider using a password manager
- Install SSL on your website, which, as a bonus, gives you an SEO boost
- Use a plug-in to limit the amount of logins into your site
- Do not use public Wi-Fi networks that are not password protected

Design matters

I really liked Annie Smidt’s talk “Easy Design Tips for Non Designers.” She says (and I completely agree) that design can make your site look credible, and can also help visitors like your site. We all know how important it is to make a good first impression.

Some things Annie suggested non-designers should consider:

- Have a hierarchy—the most important message must stand out
- Consistency is important
- Your color palette should match your audience and the mood you are trying to create (Annie provided some great sites/ideas on how to come up with palettes too)

- Typography increases comprehension, so choose typefaces carefully and don't use too many fonts (she says having two is good: one serif, one sans serif)

One important tidbit I learned from Annie was how to make em-dashes on WordPress. All you have to do is use the Omega button to access special characters. I've already done it in this post!

You can read her slides [here](#), and see her excellent suggestions on where to get color palette ideas.

There were dozens of other sessions on three different tracks. Some were targeted to developers and some to those who work in government or big institutions. Most of them should be available on WordPress TV.

I highly recommend attending a WordCamp in person. It's fun, you'll learn new stuff and great hacks, meet new people, and not to mention, you'll get a t-shirt. For a list of upcoming WordCamps, just check WordCamp Central. There are WordCamps everywhere!

A website mantra to help you achieve marketing nirvana

A mantra is defined by Merriam-Webster as a mystical formula of invocation or incantation. In Sanskrit, a mantra is a phrase, word, or sound that is repeated during meditation to help practitioners focus.

If you want to increase your website's performance and focus, I have come up with a mantra for you:

Make it easier to find.

If you concentrate on this mantra, you will have a website where people have an easier time finding the information they want.

If you don't, you will make your website users so frustrated that they will leave your website and will end up not doing business with you.

Searching and searching

This morning, I decided to research CD rates at a local bank. First, I had to put in my zip code "to get localized results." Then, I had to navigate to a "Savings and CDs" page. Then, I had to click on "Savings Accounts and CD Options." Then, I had to click on "Certificates of Deposit," and then scroll down to find the link for "Interest Rates." To sum it up, I had to go through five different steps/clicks to find the information I was seeking.

What do most people need and want to know?

I think going through five steps to find simple information is too many steps. It can be discouraging to have to keep clicking through various pages to get what you need. In the case of the bank, I assume the one thing most people research are rates. Every industry and business has to answer some questions more frequently than others. Restaurants, for example, may need to provide their menu, hours and location. Banks need to provide a list of services, current rates, hours and locations.

The information your website visitors request the most, and need the most, needs to be easiest to find. It's that simple.

So repeat after me: make it easier to find. There, are you

feeling a bit more zen?

How to make one of your biggest marketing decisions

Do we agree that your website is one of your largest (if not *the* largest) marketing properties? If so, then read on.

When you are a solo business owner like me, you don't have an IT department or a webmaster. And so it's up to you to deal with your website. Last week I changed web hosts for the fourth time in the more than 15 years that I've had this website. It's something I've been wanting to do for a while for many reasons (perhaps the subject of an upcoming post) and I am glad I did. Going through the process showcased exactly why it's so important to choose the right host.

Choosing a website host is a crucial business decision

Since your website is your front office on the Internet and it needs to remain open and accessible at all times, choosing your web host is a critical business decision. There are dozens if not hundreds of website hosts (do a search and you will see), many offering dirt cheap hosting packages. The host you choose can have a tremendous impact on your business, and your decision should not involve price alone.

Here's what you want from a website host:

Near perfect reliability. In hosting parlance, this is called "uptime" and you want to make sure it is as close to 100% as possible. If your host's servers go down frequently, that

means your website goes down frequently, which basically means lost business for you. And when servers are down, you won't get email either, which also means lost business.

Fast website loading times. Website loading is partially due to your host's servers (capacity, whether they are shared or dedicated) and partially due to factors on your website (number of plug-ins, design). According to my current host, the closer the servers are to your customers, the faster the website loading times. Website loading times may even affect your SEO ranking (read more about it [here](#)).

Good if not great customer service. If there's a problem, you want to be able to speak to someone who can (and wants) to help you. You are looking for customer service that is available 365/24/7, and if you are in the U.S., preferably based here. You may also want to look for an employee-owned company, because the people you talk to will have a real interest in solving any problems you may have.

Clean record. Some hosts, due to their cheap rates, attract a lot of spammy businesses, which in turn get the host blacklisted by some ISPs. This is big. Your host's standing can affect whether your emails get delivered (my previous host was blacklisted by Yahoo and my emails to Yahoo addresses would all bounce back) and even your SEO standing.

Ability to deal with your website specifications. You want to make sure tech support understands your platform. For example, if you run a WordPress site, you want a host that works with WordPress; and if you run ecommerce on your website, you want a host that can handle secure transactions.

Ease of use. My last hosting provider had two different accounts for me. One was a billing account, with a separate user name and password, and a "cPanel" account, for handling website administration. If I needed to update credit card information, I had to log in to billing, and to change website

parameters, to cPanel. To make it worse, you couldn't access cPanel from the the main hosting website, but rather through an obscure URL you had received when you signed up. Needless to say, this was not easy or simple. It wasted a lot of my time too.

Here are three other important tips:

1. **Don't rely on your developer/designer's recommendation.** Many website developers have reseller accounts with a website host, so it's in their own interest to sell you that. Do your own research. There are several resources to help you identify a good host. I like SiteGeek. Check out reviews and see what people are saying. Are many people having the same issue? What is the main complaint? Are more people leaving a host than transferring in?
2. **NEVER register your domain with your website hosting company.** If there's a problem, they will be able to hold your website hostage. Instead, choose a separate registrar. It may not be the cheapest option, but it will save you hassle in the long run, and let you maintain control of your website.
3. **Have a separate email account on Gmail or something similar.** Use this for the administrative emails that you get from your website hosting company and domain registrar. If your website and email are down you will still be able to access your stuff, particularly if you forgot your user name and/or password, or need to respond to a work ticket.

Remember your website is an integral part of your business and marketing efforts. Money you spend on your website—whether it be on design and development, hosting, listing—is a business/marketing expense that I can assure you will provide you a return on your investment. Cheaper, especially in website hosting, is just cheaper, not better.

3 website blunders that are costing you readers

Have you checked your analytics lately? What's your bounce rate? If it is high, it means that people arrive at your website only to "bounce off" a few seconds later. This means they are not reading your content. This means they are not clicking through to other pages. And of course, this means they are not buying your product, supporting your cause or contacting you to learn more about your services.

Here are three website blunders that could be costing you readers (and support):

1. Audio/video autoplay: Nothing, and I mean nothing, makes me close a website faster than auto sound/video. It always startles me and then it irritates. Do not, under any circumstances, enable autoplay on your website. Not many people want noise (talk/music that is unwanted is noise) suddenly blasting out of their device.

2. Links to abandoned social media feeds: Sending folks to a Twitter account that hasn't been updated in months (or worse, years) is a recipe for failure. *If you can't keep up with a particular social media account, do not link to it.* People do check social media accounts because they want to see what you've been up to. If there's nothing there, they assume you are not active, not just on social media, but in general.

P.S. Plus, it's essential that your social media descriptions be up to date, and relevant.

3. Your way or the highway: Are you enabling pop-ups to force people to sign-up for a newsletter before being able to access

your site? Are you asking people to subscribe to email in order to get updates instead of allowing RSS subscriptions? Telling people to go to Facebook to read the latest news? If you are *imposing* your favorite tactic, you are effectively telling people that it's your way or not at all. People appreciate choice. And different people like different things, so offering options is always good (not too many options mind you).

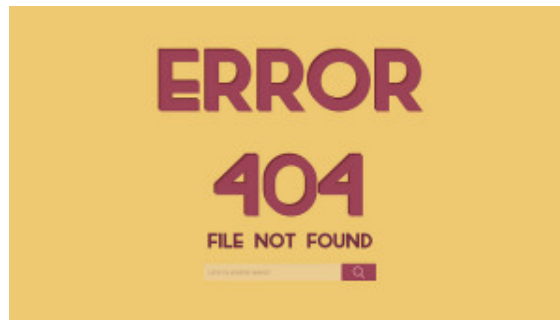
Are you committing any of the above three blunders? If not, there are several other issues that may be turning off readers, including:

- Making your content hard to read (font/type that is too small or white type on black background)
- Website is too busy (too much going on, distracting)
- Typos and/or spelling/grammatical mistakes
- Outdated information
- Not enough information

What sends you off a website? Please share your website peeves with me in the comments.

Is that link broken?

Every Monday, I get a newsletter that compiles events. Yesterday, it listed an event that sounded interesting and when I clicked on the link to learn more, it took me to a 404-error page not found.



By PastaWS on Flickr

Broken links or missing pages are a hassle for your readers. And not only that, search engines punish you for them (by affecting your SEO).

If you are planning an email/enewsletter/Tweet/Facebook post/etc.: Check your links before sending or posting. It's that simple. Just click on them and make sure they are taking you to the right place. It may be an extra few minutes of your time, but it will make your readers happy and make you look competent.

If you want to make sure there are no broken links on your website, there are many tools that can help you (search for broken link checker). Here's a compilation, specific for WordPress sites:

5 Tools to Check for Broken Links

Once you've found broken links on your website, you will want to fix them.

Web Marketing: How to Deal with Broken Links

Make sure to put some time and effort into avoiding sending people to non-existent website pages. It will help maintain your readers' trust and your standing with the search engines.

If you come across a broken link, what do you do?