Many small business owners struggle with the seemingly overwhelming task of managing their web site. There always seems to be so much to do, yet no time to do it all (something we know all too well). This brief primer should help to highlight the key aspects of web site management that will help them gain the most from their web site with the time that they have available.

The following ten tips are the key to maintaining a successful web site. Follow these and your site will do better. Nothing will guarantee that a web site will be successful, as there are too many different factors that impact web success - but as a general rule these ten tips will always lead to better performance.

**#1 Content**

Content is key. The more content you have on your site the more the search engines can scan - but there is more to it than that: people like content too. Many people measure a web site's success by the number of visitors it gets - so ask yourself - why would people come to your web site? You need to offer them interesting and informative information that relates to your product or service.

Relevant content and lots of it is a key for a successful web site. There is always room for more content on a web site, and you can never have too much. Set aside some quality time each week to devote to adding new content to your web site.

**#2 Freshness**

Keep it current. Having lots of content is great - but if it is all three years old it's not going to look like your site is much of a priority. The search engines actually track this. They monitor how frequently your site changes as they visit it for indexing. The more often it changes the better your rank in the freshness category.

What constitutes change? Pretty much anything - which is why keeping a BLOG or adding frequent news articles to your web site usually produces such good results. It is also the reason why having something as simple as rotating content and the current date on every page has been shown to make a difference (although the search engines have been getting wise to this kind of tactic)

**#3 No Tricks**

Many design firms promise success through the use of tricks, backdoors, and special tactics designed to sneak a web site into a top position rapidly. This is something that the search engines are constantly battling to defeat. Why play the game? As the search engines find the cheaters they will plug the holes and the rank that that site had will immediately be lost. Follow the recommendations of the search engines - most set out rules for web masters that outline what they would like to see in a web site. By following the rules the engines are actually battling all the cheating web sites and working to promote the sites that follow the rules - they are fighting FOR you!

**#4 Links**

Links both in and out must be relevant. There has been a lot of talk about link exchanges - people linking to others merely to gain a higher rank if you are going to link to someone and/or ask them to link to you - ask yourself, is the link exchange relevant? Old links are not going to help you much - search engines will look at who is linking to you - they are also starting to pay very close attention to how many links you have off your web site on a page. This is being done to try and drop sites with pages of links.

It is far better to have relevant links places throughout your web site - on only those pages that specifically the topic that relates to the page being linked to. Unfortunately you can't exert too much control over the way that other sites link to yours but it is worth looking at how a site usually links to others before to specifically go requesting a link from them.

**#5 Structure**

Organize your web site and everyone will thank you. Both the search engines and your web visitors prefer a web site that is well structured. The search engines due to their very nature must break down all web sites into elements based on the structure of the pages. People, so frequently rushing to find the specific information they are looking for, rarely read through web pages but rather scan headings and bullied lists to find the detailed sections of interest. In both cases a well structured site will be far better received then one that is a just a compressed volume of information thrown together.

This is simple to do - but all too often missed. Make headings, use the correct coding tags for them, organize sections of content into groups, and use bold and bullied lists to present key points. Keep in mind when writing paragraphs of text that most people will not read them unless they are specifically titled with a headline that matches what they are looking for.

**#6 Accessibility**

A web site that speaks to all is better than a site that only speaks to some. Tips #6 and #7 are closely related: The Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) provides a list of guidelines for how to create web sites that are accessible to as many people as possible. Think about your web site - can someone with a visual disability (perhaps even something as simple as color-blindness) still get information about your product or service? If not, how do you feel knowing that you have just excluded a vast segment of the population from accessing your web site?

There are many simple ways that you can ensure your web site is accessible to people with special needs. A group of simple tests for the sites content and design that ensure your product or service is presented to the widest possible audience. The specifics are beyond the scope of this document - but be sure that you check with your designer to ensure that your site design and code is following accessibility guidelines.

**#7 Quality Code**

Well coded web sites perform better. Many small business owners don't have too much control over the code used to create their web site - but it is still important to know how important it may be. Standard compliant code that has been checked for errors is easier for the search engines to assimilate. It is more widely visible across varied platforms (computer types) and in different browsers.

Ensure your web designer is writing standard compliant code that is validated for errors. You can also check your own web site using free on-line tools from the W3C (The World Wide Web Consortium - the standards body that administers Internet technologies)

**#8 URLs**

Prudent choice of URLs will impact your web site's performance. Professional web designers should already know this - but if you are using a content management system to build your web site, or portions of it, it is important to understand the significance of the URL used to access pages on your web site. Search engines look at the address of every page on your web site and try to extract key-words from the content of the url. For example, you may have a page about "Widgets" on your web site called "somewhere.com" creating the page with a filename of wigits.html will give a better keyword rank then page6.html this is also true of sub-directories on the site somewhere.com/widgets/... being better then somewhere.com/files/... This is a fairly subtle point but makes a significant difference for most search engines. It can also make it much easier for people that are typing in a URL to access a specific page of your web site. If you really want to target a key phrase consider purchasing a micro-site for that phrase. A Micro-site is an inexpensive secondary web site that can be tailored to focus on a specific key phrase or concept.

**#9 Style**

Looks do matter - but perhaps not the way you think. In the grand scheme of things the "looks" of a web site in the classic sense are not really that important - honestly! once people have looked at a web site for a few minutes they will quickly discard their first impression (based on looks) and move immediately to asking - is this site giving me the information I need - and can I find it quickly (going back to tips #1 - content and #5 - structure) So what are we on about with style? Simple - ensure the style of your site makes it easy to read. Avoid things like black backgrounds with white text (inverse text is harder to read) ALL CAPS (humans read by identifying word shapes - writing in all caps forces people to read every letter and quickly becomes annoying - plus on the net it is used as an typographic method of indicating you are screaming) You should also check your web site using a color blind test to ensure that visitors with the various types of color-blindness can still actually read your navigation.

**#10 Images**

If you are selling something that has a visual representation - then professional looking photography is crucial. Even a multi-million dollar resort will not look good if the photographs are amateurish. If you care about what you have to sell, then it's worth investing in some professional photographs to show people what you have. Remember, on-line people can't get a hold of your product - so you need to give them some really good photographs so that they can feel confident that it meets their needs.

Happy Marketing!

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