



Always keep looking for ways to improve your website so you don't look dated in a fast-paced environment.

Keeping Your Website Fresh

Answer six key questions to ensure your website conveys a positive business image and remains an effective resource for your customers. By Jeff Siegel

Veronique Michalik lives in Austin, Texas, one of the most tech-savvy cities in the country. Her husband is a digital designer who builds websites. Does that mean Michalik had a problem-free run on her way to putting up the website for Lofty Dog, her 2,100-square-foot boutique?

Nope.

"In the pet store business, we know pets and we know our customers," said Michalik, who is getting ready to launch the second version of her website. "But we don't often see the business side of that. And that includes websites, and we need to keep current on things like that."

The question in the second decade of the 21st century is not whether you need a website for your business. The question is how to keep your website fresh and current to market your business more effectively—especially to younger, more

Internet-friendly consumers who use websites the way customers used Yellow Pages 20 years ago.

A quick online session will show you that what defines a top-notch website has changed markedly over the last several years.

"Always, but always, keep looking for ways to improve your website," said Rick Wamre, a small-business consultant in

Dallas. "These things are not like brochures that you could prepare, print and then use without alteration for a few years. Everything about the Web seems to change daily, and you have to keep your site reasonably updated, too. Since [your] website reflects your business' image, if the image looks a little dated, it will cost you business in the long term."

Your website can't rest on its laurels, agreed Rodney Mason, chief marketing officer for Moosylvania (St. Louis), a digital marketing and design firm that works with small businesses. "You have to make your site a resource for consumers," he said. "It's not about selling your business; it's about establishing a relationship with your customers."

So how do you do that? It doesn't matter if you're building a website for the first time, or if you're upgrading your existing site. The process revolves around answering six questions.

1. DIY or Hire a Designer?

Many retailers are terrified to put up a website themselves, but see the process of hiring a designer and supervising his or her work as just as overwhelming. This, said Mason, is the most intimidating part of website implementation for small businesses.

"There is an entire misconception among small-business owners that their business can't go on the Internet because the website will be terrible," he said. "They're so worried about not making a mistake that they don't do it at all!"

And though there are all sorts of horror stories about the process, from designers who take the money and run to websites that never seem to work properly, the horror stories are the exceptions and not the rules, said Wamre.



In April 1996, PET AGE published an article titled "Welcome to Cyberspace: A Newcomer's Guide to Navigating the Internet." We're a little red-faced to admit it now, but our introduction compared the Internet to fads like pet rocks and Cabbage Patch Kids!

Website Design Options

COMPLICATED E-COMMERCE SITES will likely require a designer, and often a programmer, to handle all the moving parts (though there are companies that sell e-commerce packages, including templates).

Less complicated sites, which tend to be more common, can be handled in several ways:

- **Packaged sites.** Companies like Intuit offer templates, basic support, hosting and very simple e-commerce options. These are usually inexpensive—but you get what you pay for, including limited design flexibility.

- **Web-based blog software.** With

a little ingenuity, blogging applications such as TypePad and WordPress can be used to create business websites. They're inexpensive and easy to figure out—but again, flexibility is limited.

- **Designer-produced basic site.** This can cost anywhere from a couple of hundred dollars to 10 or 20 times that, depending on what you want done and where in the country you're located. One caveat, said Ashton Brown, the owner and lead designer for Thermo Studios (Austin, Texas): Ask the designer not only for sites he or she has done, but references. And check them.

—Jeff Siegel

"The ease of doing this has improved by leaps and bounds over the past several years," said Ashton Brown, the owner and lead designer for Thermo Studios (Austin, Texas), who works with small businesses on website design. "There is good software to use, and it's much easier to use."

Ask other retailers about their experiences, said Michalik: What worked for them? How did they do it? Did they work with someone who was dependable and reliable?

Michalik attended a seminar sponsored by an Austin business group designed to help retailers answer those questions. "It's important to do your research," she said. "Be proactive."

Remember, it's not so much whether you choose to do the site yourself or hire someone to do it; it's that you choose the option that works best for you.

2. Who Will Maintain the Site?

Regardless of who designs the site, someone is going to have to take care of it—update it when necessary, change outdated information, and the like. Ideally, said Michalik, even if someone else builds the site, they should design it so you can make simple changes. Not only is this less expensive in the long run, since you won't have to pay someone to make changes, but also more timely. If you won't be able to make changes on the site, make sure you agree ahead of time with the designer about how changes will be made.

3. Do You Understand the Basics?

Every website, said Brown, should have several basic components:

- Store hours and contact and location information. This can include a map pinpointing your store and e-mail address or e-mail form.

- Basic information about what your store does and how. How long have you been in business? What do you sell? What services do you offer? Why do you like the pet business?

- Pictures, not only of the store but of yourself, employees and your pets. The Internet is a visual medium, after all, and this is your opportunity to personalize your store and your mission in a way you can't do in print.

In all, said Brown, a five-page website is a good start for the majority of small businesses.

In addition, your site should be set up for search engine optimization. That's the high-tech way of saying that key search terms (pet store, pet food, pet supplies and similar phrases) are attached to the site so that search engines like Google can find it.

Yes, most of this seems obvious. But just because it makes sense doesn't mean it's always done successfully.

4. Is E-commerce for You?

Should your site sell merchandise or just serve as a marketing platform? There is no

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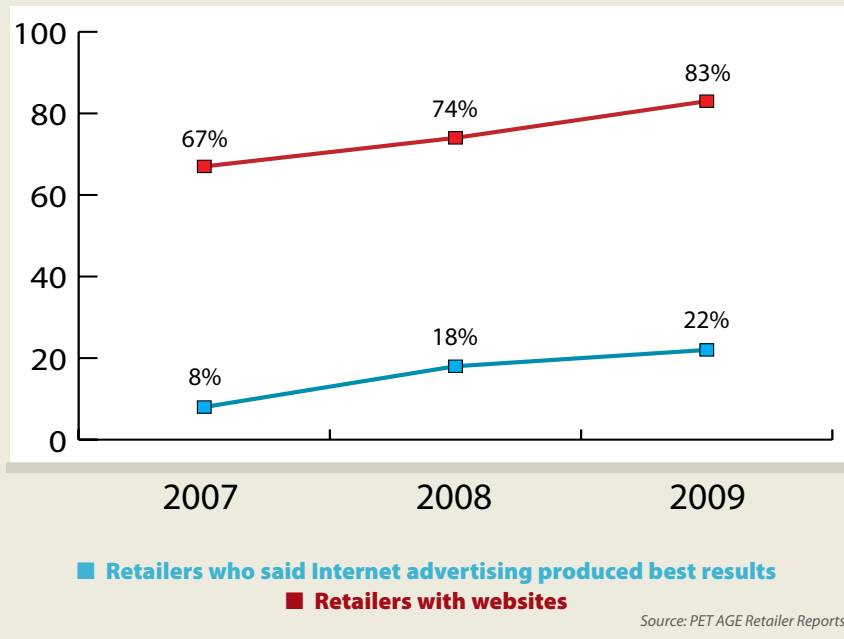
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Pet Stores and the Web

PET RETAILERS ARE enjoying the marketing benefits of an increased Internet presence.



right or wrong answer. Rather, it depends on what your business is designed to do. If you feel comfortable dealing with Internet supply chain and fulfillment issues, terms like drop shipping don't bother you, and your point-of-sale and accounting systems are robust enough to handle Web sales, then e-commerce is a possibility. If not, don't worry about it.

One rule of thumb: If you're hesitant to offer delivery, you probably don't want to get into e-commerce, said Wamre. Selling online (even doing it through a site like eBay, which provides many of the aforementioned services) is likely more

trouble than it's worth for most independent retailers.

5. Focus on Form or Function?

Everyone wants their website to look perfect, but that's a relative term, said Wamre. Design is a balance between beauty and function.

"Given the choice between a simple but beautiful website, and an expensive but dull-looking one, remember that first impressions are what sells," he said. "Unless you're trying to sell everything in your store on the website, keep your functionality to a minimum and spend

your money on the website's appearance and design. If the front page looks great, if the site is neat and well-organized, and if all of the linked pages work and help the customer determine you're his or her best choice, you're on the right track."

Website designers offer a couple of general guidelines: Less text is better than more text, and simple pages are better than complicated pages. These pertain to the idea that a website page should not be too long and cumbersome to navigate. Think of each page as the length of the computer screen. Everything that is lower than the bottom of the screen will be seen by proportionately fewer visitors.

"Build the pages according to what you need," said Michalik, "instead of falling in love with the look. I picked a look that was too limited for my first site—too text heavy, and the columns were too long and narrow."

How do you decide what your site should look like? Look on the Internet. Search for pet stores similar to yours. Search for small businesses similar to yours. What do those sites do that you like? What do they do that you don't like? And don't hesitate to ask those businesses how they put their sites together.

6. Do You Need Bells and Whistles?

Website add-ons have mushroomed over the past several years. You can add social media functions like Twitter and Facebook, include mini-blogs, sign up customer rating sites like Yelp, and link to Flickr pictures and YouTube videos. You can ask your customers to provide content—pictures of their pets, for example. You can optimize the site for smart phones and mobile devices.

In fact, there are so many options that it's easy to get confused and not do any. Again, what you do is a function of what you feel comfortable with. If you don't have time to maintain a site with lots of extras, then don't add them.

But if you do have the time, and you do feel comfortable with it, the payoff could be significant, said Mason.

"People always prefer to root for the local guy, for the small guy," he said. "This is your opportunity to show them what you are, and to make that connection with them." ■

Jeff Siegel is a freelance writer in Dallas. He has covered the pet industry for nearly 20 years.

"I like PET AGE because it is succinct, and yet loaded with useful information for the independent pet shop owner. Since I don't often attend trade shows, I appreciate the information about new products and especially the columns by Dave Ratner and Barry Berman that help us market and manage our business in this changing economy."

—Jane Donley, Co-owner,
Dog Beach Dog Wash (San Diego)

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