



# WEAVING A WEBSITE

## Best Practices for your Business

By Kelley Granger

**N**o matter what your industry, a presence on the web is all but mandatory. Whether you're providing a simple, informative page of contact information and a brief description of services or building an extensive website with a full-blown e-commerce component, there are certain tenets to keep in mind that will ensure your site is attractive and effective. *Regional Report* spoke with a number of area professionals who provide design and optimization services to cull their insight on the topic.

### WELL-DESIGNED

Your website may be the first impression a potential customer has of your business, so it makes sense to approach it with purposeful design in mind. Kathleen Packard, the president and creative director of **KathodeRay Media Inc.** in Greenville, believes keeping things straightforward is key. "Keep it simple—you don't have to clutter pages with a lot of content," she says. "Engage the user and lead them through the process."

Remember that visitors to your site are coming to find specific information. Make that information easy to find. "If a visitor isn't getting the information they think they want, they'll bounce off your site, and hitting the back button is bad in number of ways," says Packard. "First, you've lost a visitor. And

then from a search engine optimization standpoint, it'll look like the visitor felt that they've hit the wrong place."

A visitor may also be inclined to hit the back button if your page doesn't load quickly. Don't get carried away on elements that might slow down a user's experience, and remember that the way visitors are accessing your page is evolving—people may be logging on from a laptop, an iPad, or their mobile phone, all different viewing experiences. Packard recommends ensuring that any images are sized and compressed for optimum web performance and that you use standardized fonts.

"I tend to like to lean towards minimalism," says Jeff Severson of **J.T.S. Design** in Ulster Park, whose work spans from web design to custom development. "A design with too many elements can distract a user and/or make it difficult for them to find a focal point. Bells and whistles can be nice accents, but the main purpose a user has for visiting your website is to become informed." Keep the focus of your design on content, keeping in mind that color choices affect readability.

George Nivers, owner of **Optimize Web** in New Paltz, says that finding a content management system that you can use to update the site yourself is invaluable if you have a small budget or plan to maintain the site without professional assistance. "People

want to manage their own content and not have to pay for someone to do that for them," he says. He's a fan of the WordPress blog tool and publishing platform. "If you use WordPress as the base of your website, there are thousands of free applications you can use in conjunction with it. If someone builds a site for you, then you have to purchase each item and have them develop it for you."

### THE SEO LOWDOWN

The web has almost limitless potential to help expand your customer base, but only when you approach your presence with a strategy. Search engine optimization, or SEO, is designed to maximize the number of visitors to your site by improving your rank among the list of results returned by a search engine. Jordan Dick, who operates **Venturi Web Design** out of Ulster Park and specializes in SEO services, says SEO is a subject that's simultaneously simple and complex—but the basics are something a website shouldn't ignore.

Whether you're building a new site or looking to enhance your search engine ranking for an existing site, the first step is to create a list of relevant key words. Dick says you should brainstorm all the possible terms that a person may search that would lead them to your business. For example, a local florist might include "New Paltz florist"

and “Ulster County flower arrangements” on their list of terms. Once you’ve put together your list, you’ll want to weave these words into the content of your website.

“You’ll want to incorporate these key words in your content in a way that reads naturally and gets the information across,” says Dick. “If you’re going to stuff key words in a page you’re going to get penalized [in your search engine ranking]. Search engines are smart—they analyze content and know how people naturally write.”

Dick says another crucial piece to improving your rank is getting links to your site from reputable sources. “It’s not who you link out to, but getting other sites to link to you, especially those sites that have relevant content,” he says.

Finally, if you haven’t already signed up with Google, Yahoo, or Bing for a local business listing, you should. It’s often an easy and free way to get your business to pop up at the top of a search results page.

#### BUYING INTO E-COMMERCE

When considering an e-commerce solution, keep your budget in mind and make sure you also develop a marketing plan to devise a strategy around how to get your products out.

If you have no budget, PayPal link can provide you with an easy solution, though it will cost you a percentage of each transaction. For clients with more of a budget to play with, Jeff Severson recommends custom developed shopping carts or using a third-party shopping cart.

Remember to keep ease of transaction at the forefront. “Put yourself in your customer’s shoes,” says Packard, who also develops e-commerce solutions for clients. “Ask: Is it easy to check out? Do you have to go to another site to check out? When you’re in the check out process, how many screens do you have to check out on? Is it easy for you to find out shipping costs?”

Packard says to remember that e-commerce is a different ballgame than sales in-store. “When someone walks into a store, it takes a lot more effort to walk out and find another to save a couple of dollars,” she says. Online, it doesn’t take that much effort to click to another business’s page, so make sure that you’re competitive and your products are easy to navigate. ■



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