




Your Company's Web Site: Where to Begin

Ben Hubble
Property Line





“The Census Bureau of the Department of Commerce announced today that the estimate of U.S. retail e-commerce sales for the second quarter of 2005, adjusted for seasonal variation and holiday and trading-day differences, but not for price changes, was **\$21.1 billion**, an increase of 7.2 percent ($\pm 0.8\%$) from the first quarter of 2005.”

QUARTERLY RETAIL E-COMMERCE SALES: 2nd QUARTER
2005 (8/19/05)

<http://www.census.gov/mrts/www/data/html/05Q2.html>

Do you need a Web Site?

- Yes
 - The imaging supplies industry is an offshoot of the computer industry and most customers have and depend on Internet access. To find or contact you, customers most likely turn to their computer
 - Easy access to company information
 - Effective system to catalog and track products and orders.

Do you need a Web Site?

- No
 - Information about your company is not public, your customers are personally selected, and you do not need to dynamically track orders or merchandise.

What type of Web Site?

Think about you clients
and how you want to serve them.

What type of Web Site?

Happy Customers = Return Customers

- If your customers are generally knowledgeable about what they need, then consider an emphasis on the products with little information.
- If your customers are generally not sure what they need, then consider an emphasis on the product information and explanation.

What type of Web Site?

Decide the type of Web site that best suites your needs

- **Brochure** site explaining your company with a phone/email to get product (“propertyline.com”)
- **Informational** site that teaches how to use and support your products, with incidental links to purchase (like “rechargermagazine.com”)
- **Portal** site that provides links to many industry sites in one convenient location (“yahoo.com”)
- **Shopping** site that provides a complete catalog of your inventory and purchase ability (“amazon.com”)

What type of Web Site?

A Note on Shopping Sites

- While possibly the most financially lucrative, shopping sites are also the most difficult to create. In addition to posting company information, a database of product inventory and purchase information must be used, in addition to an online payment process. If you currently accept credit cards, you may want to contact your credit card company about getting an online merchant account.
- <http://smallbusiness.yahoo.com/merchant>

What type of Web Site?

Look at your budget

- Cost of a Web site ranges from region to region so the following estimates may be higher or lower in your area:
 - Brochure site: \$500 to \$1,000
 - Informational site: \$1,000 to \$1,500
 - Portal site: \$1,000 to \$1,500
 - Shopping site: \$1,000 to \$4,000
- Every project is unique and these are the very basic costs for the creation and design.

Web Site Requirements

A Web site requires three things:

- A domain name
- A Webhost (including DNS)
- Web pages (coded pages)

Web Site Requirements

The Domain Name

- A domain name (yourcompany.com) can be purchased and registered from many different online locations. Shop around for the best deal. You should not pay more than \$35 per year and can often get name for as low as \$8 per year.

Website Requirements

How to purchase a domain:

- networksolutions.com is the official company to oversee domains but many other companies register domains for less money:
 - godaddy.com
 - register.com
 - networksolutions.com
- All sites will walk you through the registration process. When registering the domain, be careful about using your most commonly used email address. Since the registrations are often public, the contact email address may be discovered by spammers.

Web Site Requirements

The Web Host

- A Web host provides access to a Web server. Web pages are placed onto a Web server so that they can be viewed over the Internet. Generally, the cost for hosting a site with a Web host can range from a bare-bones shared-space server (your site shares server space with other companies) for about \$10 a month to a dedicated server (you are the only company using on the server) for hundreds of dollars a month.

Web Site Requirements

The Web Host

- In addition to providing the server space and Web server technology (generally Apache or Microsoft's IIS), the Web host should provide use of their Dynamic Name System server. The DNS allows the conversion of "yourcompany.com" into IP numbers that the computer can understand and process accordingly. It is also possible to set up your own Web server so that you are your own Web host.

Web Site Requirements

Selecting a Web Host

- Your designer should be able to help you select a Web hosting company (many have existing relationships with each other that may save you money). Depending on the kind of site you need, your hosting needs will vary. There are many Web hosting companies and a quick Web search should reveal many to choose from.
 - propertyline.com
 - dreamhost.com
 - boilfrog.com

Web Site Requirements

The Web Pages

- The Web pages are placed on the Web server and viewed using the Web browser (such as Internet Explorer, Netscape Communicator, or Mozilla's Firefox). The Web pages themselves consist of code that links to images and other pages. The pages are often written in HTML or a related language.

Web Site Requirements

Behind a Web page

- A Web page is a coded page that is displayed using a Web browser. It generally has some text, pictures, possibly animation, and links to other pages.

Web Site Requirements

The Text

- Simply put, the writing on the page. It is often the most important part of Web pages. The text delivers the most basic message of the site and appears first when the page is being downloaded. English is the most common language for Web sites but many translation services can convert the text into the appropriate language for the viewer. Since most search engines (including Google) use the text of a site to determine its search results rankings, it is very important that your text be clear and accurate. Clear and accurate text information will help your potential customers get clear and accurate search result listings.

Web Site Requirements

The Text

- The basic look of the text is determined by the viewer's browser. You can make "suggestions" about the size on style, but how it appears on the screen is often dependant on the viewer's browser and system.
- Text should be used:
 - Paragraphs of information
 - In the "alt" tag of the images
 - On your contact page. All contact information should be text (as opposed to images)

Web Site Requirements

The Images

- Images should help illustrate your text and provide design support. Images can enhance your site but remember that the more images, the longer it takes to download a website. Most images on a site should be there for a reason. If it doesn't need to be there, remove it. One common use of images is to get more control of how text looks. While it is nice to know how text will appear, you can run into bandwidth problems.

Web Site Requirements

The Images

Images on a site are generally:

- **jpg**: used for photos and images with many variations in color
- **gif**: used for images with sharp lines and limited color variation
- **Flash**: Doesn't always work on every browser but allows animation.

Website Requirements

About Flash

- Flash is a commercial product that was initially designed for animation but has evolved into a full-scale website alternative. Generally, the Flash viewer (or player) is installed in the Web browser and no action is required by the viewer to see the Flash animation. The use of Flash often increases the production cost of a site.

Website Requirements

About Flash

The Good:

- Allows for almost complete control of how an entire site, including text, looks
- Integrated animation and visual effects (good “wow” factor)
- It can easily be put onto CD/DVDs for non-Internet distribution

Website Requirements

About Flash

The Bad:

- It requires a special viewer to be seen (most browsers have the player but not all)
- It can be difficult for search engines to catalog
- It requires a specific program to be created or edited

Website Requirements

About Flash

The Ugly:

- Bandwidth: a Web site done in Flash can become very bandwidth intensive and slow



The Designer

After considering some of the different Web options, you may be ready to contact a Web designer.

How do you find a designer?



The Designer

- Look at sites that you like. Often, the designer gets some credit on the site or you can contact the company to learn more about their designers. Very large companies often design their sites in-house but they may be able to offer a reference. Even if a particular designer cannot help you, he or she will love the site design complement and may offer assistance.

The Designer

- Contact your print graphic designer for a reference. Do be careful of the print designer that also does “Web work.” While many people can do both well, different skill sets are required and many print designers lack the technical skill (and, in fairness, some with technical skill lack a designer’s flair).

The Designer

- Look for articles on Web design and research the author or quoted experts.
- Contact your local Chamber of Commerce
- Look online. Search for “Web Designer” and your city.

The Designer's Portfolio

Every Web designer should have a portfolio for you to view online.

When looking at the different sites in the portfolio, look not just at the style of the sites but also at what the site does.

Things to consider...

The Designer's Portfolio

- Ask the designer how responsible he or she was for the look of the site. Was it designed alone, on a team, or from a template?
- Ask the designer how responsible he or she was for the functionality on the site. Was it programmed alone, on a team, or from a template?

The Designer's Portfolio

- What tools did the designer use to create the sites? If the designer indicates Microsoft's FrontPage, note that little programming is required to use it. Most professional designers avoid FrontPage because it historically adds "extra" code. Adobe's ImageReady is an image-based website creator that requires little programming skill to use and should also be avoided because it can be difficult to edit the pages later. The most popular tool used to create professional Web sites is Macromedia's Dreamweaver.

The Designer's Portfolio

- Do any of the sites relate to the imaging supplies industry? An understanding of the industry may help you when communicating your ideas to the designer.

The Designer Needs

What the designer/programmer will need from you:

- Your logo (GIF, JPG formats)
- Your site text
- Your technical specifications (domain name, server type)

Search Engines

- Once your site is ready, it is important that it be indexed by search engines so that potential customers can find your site. Popular search engines include:
 - Yahoo
 - MSN Search
 - Ask Jeeves
 - Google

Google

- The most popular search engine is Google.
- How Google works:
 - Googlebot finds sites through linking or submission
 - An indexer sorts every word on every page and stores the results in a database
 - A query processor compares a search query to the index and recommends the pages it considers most relevant

Google

- Google is somewhat secretive about how they rank pages but it is generally done through the text on the page, the links, and the number of outside pages linked to a page. The higher the score on each of these three aspects, the higher on the list your site will appear.
- Unfortunately, it is very difficult to discover the perfect combination that can get you on top and keep you there based on normal search patterns. A competitive market, such as the imaging supplies industry, makes the number-one spot difficult to attain. Even the number 100 spot can be hard to get when there are over two million results (such as with a Google search for “printer toner”).

Search Options

Focus on the text

- The most important tool for effective searching (and a good Web page) is good text. Be sure that the text on your page clearly states what it is that you do and contains common terms used by your customers. Be sure that the text is actually text and not part of an image (because the image text is not cataloged). If you do have images, make sure that the designer added accurate descriptions to the image “alt” tags in the code. This helps not only by allowing the search engine to know what the image is but it allows for people not seeing the image to have a description of it.

Search Options

Focus on the text

- Your text should contain “keywords” that match what your customer’s search criteria. If your customer searches using the keyword “toner,” then it is very important that the word “toner” appear on your site for it to be ranked.

Search Options

META tags

- Some search companies use “spiders” or “robots” to index Web pages. These programs read the information contained within a page’s META tag. So in theory, an HTML or Web page author has the ability to control how their site is indexed by search engines and how and when it will rank on a user’s search. Alas, META tag abuse (secretly claiming the site has more of something than it did) has caused many search engines (including reportedly Google) to ignore META tags. It is good to include them but they probably will not help dramatically with search rankings.

Search Options

Look at your links

- Make sure that your site has text links that go to all the pages on your site and they refer back to each other. If possible, create reciprocal agreements so that your Web site address appears on other sites outside your own site. Theoretically, if your link appears on a top-rated site, it will boost your ranking.

Search Options

Pay

- Google allows for companies to purchase advertisements that appear to the right of the normal search results. The Google AdWords are “smart” ads that appear based on that the user’s search. For more information, look at <https://adwords.google.com>.
- Many companies offer “Search Engine” registration and increased rankings for a fee. Most search engines have free registration for indexing and don’t allow seamless pay-for-placement. Some consumer-rights groups have criticized search companies for not disclosing paid results.

Search Options

Free Registration

- While Google may automatically find and index your site, you can speed up the process by registering the site with Google. You can register your site at <http://www.google.com/addurl.html>.

Publicity

Once you have a site ready for customers, don't expect for search engines to do all the work to drive customers to the site. Search engines help, but there are many other things you can do to raise awareness of your site.

Publicity

- Add the Web address (URL) to **all** company correspondence and advertising materials.
- Add the URL to your email signature.
- Consider reciprocal agreements with other Web sites to get your link on their Website
- List the URL with any relevant professional organization (including *Recharger Magazine*)

Wrap up

- Think about the kind of site that works best for your company
- Discuss your domain/hosting/design options with a designer
- Create the content while the designer creates the site structure
- Publicize the site with search results and ads