



Web Site Overview

This is part of a series of primers about websites for small business owners. This document provides a simple overview of the various parts of a website, how it works, and likely magnitude of costs.

In the most simple terms, a website is just a set of files contained on a server available to the public over the internet. A webpage is a set of files that are found at a designated address, then opened and displayed by your browser.

Domain Name

The domain name is an “English” name for your site address that lets anyone on the Internet find it. The top-level domains are .com, .net, .org, .info, .biz, .us etc. Dot-com is still the best choice for business sites unless you cannot find a suitable name available. There is an entire body of literature on strategy for selecting your site name (more information is available on our site if you are interested). The two keys points of 1) make it something that is easy to remember for your target audience (repeat visitors), and 2) make it something that is related to your topic for first-time visitors. The reality is that most of the time people will click on a link or do a search and not enter your website name manually.

Domain names are reserved on a first-come first served basis through an authorized service (called registrar) and renewed annually or for multiple years. Once you reserve a name, you can keep it as long as you renew it before it expires.

Costs for domain names vary from about \$10.00/year to over \$100.00/year based on the service used and how they package it. We offer them through a service that provides them at the low end of the cost range: https://www.secureserver.net/?prog_id=raltech. Payment is always via credit card online so any paper mail you get is solicitations to transfer to another service (usually at a higher cost).

Your registrar will provide an account and interface to manage your domain name(s). This includes payment, contacts (owner, administrative, technical, and billing), the nameserver settings, and other optional services such as forwarding, privacy, locking, and autorenew.

One name can be “assigned” to your site (and will show up in the browser bar when someone visits a page) but additional names can “forward” visitors to a specific part of your site.

Web Pages (Front End)

Your web pages are the files accessed and displayed by the visitors' browser. These files can be created in a variety of file formats using tools that range from a plain text editor to complicated and expensive software for building websites. We are not going to discuss any details about web pages here, just a few main concepts.

Your "**Site Structure**" is the overall organization of your web pages. It should reflect your business strategy for your site (whether you are providing reference information vs. online sales..) and have a logical organization so visitors can easily find what they want or get taken through the desired sequence. We recommend that you use a storyboard to plan how you site will be organized.

The "**Front End**" of the site relates to the general look and feel of your web pages. This is what you see in the browser. It includes the page layouts, the color scheme, and your general content (text and images). Web pages include a combination of text, graphics, and maybe some scripts (data processing) and a single web page typically comprised of several data files.

Graphic design and copywriting services can be useful, especially to establish the standards or tone of your site. Then additional pages can be created by staff using custom or pre-written copy and graphics. Note: Your site design should be "responsive" or fully mobile device compliant as this will impact how google rates it for searches.

Costs for web site design vary from \$0 if you use a free template found online or provided by your hosting service to many thousands of dollars for complicated, interactive sites. The whole industry of Software as a Service (SaaS) or cloud computing is basically providing web sites that serve as computer programs. More affordable ways to obtain a web design are to use options provided by your hosting service, or hiring a web designer to create a set of template pages you can use.

Hosting (Server)

Hosting is the name for renting server space so your site (web pages) is online 24/7. In IT terms, the "host" is the server that provides the files to your computer, the "client," that displays them.

You can host your own website if you run a server connected to the internet - that will not be discussed here since most small businesses will sign up for a hosting plan with an online service company. Your hosting plan will include a certain amount of disk space, a certain amount of bandwidth (access in and out for pages and email), and a number of back end functions.

The companies providing these services (and there are literally thousands of them) heavily advertise the size/MB they offer. However this is the lowest cost part of the package and since web pages are inherently small most sites use a fraction of their space (unless they never empty the email boxes). The site reliability, support, and back end functions are more important criteria.

Costs for hosting varies from free (not recommended for various reasons) to several thousand dollars /year if bundled with support services. A decent hosting plan for small business can be found for \$100-300/year, such as those we offer through the service at:

https://www.secureserver.net/?prog_id=raltch. Again, payment is via credit card online.

Other Hosting Services (Back End)

The “**Back End**” of the site relates to the things happening on your server that you do not see such as how you publish your site, any data processing (saving names, sending emails, collecting payments) and other hosting services (discussed below). The requirements of your back end will determine your hosting requirements.

The back end functions that we recommend for most small business sites are:

1. Have your own “Control panel” so you can do basic administrative stuff (like adding email accounts) yourself through your browser.
2. FTP options, whether you plan to use them or not.
3. “Branded email” whether you use it now or not.
4. Web mail interface so you can check your email from any computer when out of the office.
5. Web site traffic monitoring.
6. Basic database options (mySQL) for future use.
7. Custom script capability (cgi-bin. Perl, and php).
8. Applications such as content management systems like WordPress.

If you are serious about your site you should consider having an SSL certificate (for secure web pages) even just for regular web pages – this will make it harder for some types of attacks and is also starting to impact search engine results. This typically requires a static IP. Both of these add another \$100 or so to the annual hosting cost.

Branded Email is one of the major benefits of having a web site for many businesses. This is email@yourname.com which builds a professional image as well as building name recognition. Such email addresses can be actual email boxes or can just forward email to another address such as a Gmail account.

POP email is the standard format for most hosting email plans. This kind of email is stored on your server and can be retrieved from anywhere using an email client (software on your machine such as Microsoft Outlook) or a web mail interface. The types of email options are determined by your server configuration (the hosting plan). Some plans advertise POP email, but require you to use your ISP email for all outgoing messages. Other email related options include the ability to have a vacation message or other automatic response, email aliases (forwarding), and SPAM filters.

Since email is so important to many businesses, you may have a separate email server/setup or want redundant servers. Some technical IT discussion is required for this.

Site Operation & Maintenance

Once your site is fully tested and operational, the integration of it in your business becomes the most important issue. Keeping the server up and running is the responsibility of the hosting company and will be included in the hosting fee. Understand the service level included in your plan as well as whether it includes 24/7 phone support or not.

Checking the email and updating information on your web pages is central to your business and should be part of your normal daily operations. Major site design, re-design, and expansion are usually best contracted as one-off events, but you need to be very much involved in the site flow to reflect your business and objectives.

Site Promotion

Site promotion refers to the entire set of ways that you advertise your web site existence to attract visitors. It is important to remember that the internet is a "pull" system where users select the pages they visit and information they consume. (This is in direct contrast with traditional media like radio that is a "push" system where viewers get what the broadcasters provide.)

Website traffic can be free (comes from searches and social media), paid (from advertising), and guided (from your own newsletters or other people's recommendations).

Marketing and search engine optimization services are available for a wide range of prices (none cheap) depending upon the service offered. There is a phenomenal amount of energy devoted to web site promotion with services that guaranteed high placement on search engines, pay-per-visitor advertising, etc. Be a skeptical consumer.

The most successful site promotion will be to put good content sought by the visitors you want to attract on your website. There are several guidelines available online for how to do this and the topic goes beyond this discussion. Manually adding your site to major search engine listings is helpful, but many of these will find a site that has relevant content.

Also, include basic offline measures such as putting your site name on stationary, cards, newsletters, invoices, and other correspondence.