

Websites for Integrators

I feel the need to address an ongoing problem in the world of AV marketing – companies that simply don't understand HOW to market their companies online. I mean, it's almost 2012, folks! The Internet is not new, we all use the World Wide Web, and even social media is taking off... So how is it, that so many people out there are still confused about what they need and how to handle their business online?

A bit of background, first: I built my first hand-coded HTML web site back in 1995. This was pre-WYSIWYG, pre-web development software, pre-Flash, pre-Google even! The sad little text-heavy personal page was hosted on Geocities, back when few knew what that was and far before Yahoo bought it and subsequently shut it down. And, back then, it was AWESOME!! Once I got over that initial thrill of being "on the Web" and once I graduated from college, I entered the work world with a job at an advertising agency that also built commercial web pages -- a real novelty at the time. And, in all honesty, it was my 'mad web skillz' that got me my very first job in the AV industry. I built a site for a local integrator as a side-project while working at the agency, and when I left the agency, I joined that integrator full-time! So, one could say I know a bit about Web presence.



First off, companies need a website. Duh, right? As I mentioned, we're at the end of 2011. Yellow pages and traditional directories barely exist in print form any more. When people need information, they go to the web -- via traditional computers, tablets or smart phones. If you aren't online, you might as well not exist. And, with domain name registrations being so simple and so inexpensive these days, you really have no excuse today NOT to have a custom domain name -- www.yourcompanyname.com or whatever. It's cheap and it's easy -- make it happen. And, when you put a site up, make sure your information is accurate and spelled correctly. Just like a resume with typos will go immediately into the circular file when job-hunting, most times, a website with typos will drive the visitor to the Back button rather than the "Hire Us Now!" tab.

Now, most of you already have that much down. Frankly, even the dummies that Websites for Dummies is written for already know that much! Next is the tricky bit: You MUST-MUST-MUST update your site! Ugly sites, amateurish sites, prepackaged-and-show-it sites -- all of these can be forgiven (albeit grudgingly!) but a site that hasn't been updated or revisited in over a year? Unforgivable for a business site. Hey, the Internet has a very long memory, so people have learned to check those copyright dates and update dates for freshness. Don't want to take a chance on missing that big project because the potential client sees your stale site and thinks you're out of business, right?

Which brings me to another important point -- social media is NOT Web presence, though it plays a part in Web presence. As "man cannot live by bread alone," companies cannot thrive on Facebook alone. Yes, you should have a company Facebook page (and LinkedIn page... and so on...) but this cannot and should not be your only web presence. Accurate or not, the perception of companies that only exist on Facebook is that the company is amateur, perhaps a hobbyist and not a real company, or a start-up without resources for a "real website." Even with Facebook, you still need a website and it still needs to have regular maintenance. Obviously, your freshest content goes on Facebook (or Twitter... or whatever other social media you are most comfortable with!) but you still need to keep a website and keep it rather up-to-date. Don't have products or manufacturers on your site that are out of business!

Don't use obsolete technologies on your website either. At one point, it was common practice to include "This site best viewed on Netscape" type disclaimers on home pages. Now, if someone sees "Netscape" or other dead browsers on your site, they'll immediately leave because obviously that company is no longer in business, right? Similarly, it was once

common practice to use a Flash splash page... or frames for navigation... or any number of other formerly in-vogue technologies and tricks on web pages. Today, those sites are not merely loathed by users, they are ranked lower (if at all) on search engines and are impossible to view on tablets, smart phones and other mobile devices. In short, avoid these things, for they are evil. Now, to keep a site fresh it helps to regularly update, not just the content, but also the overall design and layout. If your current site includes Flash or frames or auto-play movies or background music, REDESIGN NOW! It will give you the dual benefits of giving your site new, fresh activity to get notice from users and search engines AND it will stop ticking off every person who visits your site!

Speaking of mobile devices, customers will ADORE you if you build a mobile-friendly version of your site! It is not that difficult to do, and countless tutorials exist online already. Plus many software packages include an option to make mobile versions, or make it easy to do so. Do it. Yes, tablet usage -- led by the iPad -- allows for standard sites to display nicely on mobile devices, but smart phones are still the mobile device of choice and the percentage of people using them grows every year. If you don't want to build an entirely new site for mobile use, at least design a mobile-friendly standard site that will display well on smaller screens -- like using a one-column site instead of multi-column.

Of course, you can avoid all of this heartburn -- and that of design challenges (Is my site professional enough? Does it make me look competent or amateur? Is it ugly?) -- by simply hiring a competent firm to design and maintain your site for you. Despite the ease of creating websites today, there are still a lot of companies out there that offer these services and specialize in the entire gamut -- from basic HTML and CSS to mobile development, App development, blog and social media services and SEO (search engine optimization). Check your local technology networking groups for companies near you, or ask other business owners who they use and trust. Or, go to an expert in AV site design. Relidy is a CE Marketing firm in Texas that specializes in websites and print marketing for CE Professionals (and, I'm sure, ProAV integrators too!). A company like Relidy can design a professional site that looks great and highlights your professional experience, while providing a Content Management System that makes updating and customizing the site incredibly easy.

Take some time right now and look at your company's web presence. Look at your site and its design. Is it up-to-date? Does it include obsolete technologies in its design and functionality? Are you relying entirely on Facebook for your web presence or do you have a real site too? Take a hard look at what your company is doing and fix what is wrong. It is not that difficult to have a quality, up-to-date website and a full web presence with social media aspects, but it does require you to be aware of the rules and best practices. However, in today's connected and mobile world, you can't afford NOT to.

To read a CEPro interview with Relidy principal Mark Bally, visit

http://www.cepro.com/article/today_only_free_advice_about_integrator_web_sites/K579

To read some Web Design Best Practices from The 60 Second Marketer, visit

<http://60secondmarketer.com/blog/2011/02/17/website-design-best-practice/>

To see the Top 5 Web Design Mistakes Made by Small Businesses, according to Mashable, visit

<http://mashable.com/2011/04/10/5-web-design-mistakes/>

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