

BUSINESS WEB PRESENCE: IT'S NO LUXURY, IT'S A NECESSITY

INVESTING IN A WEBSITE WILL SERVE AS A LIVE CORPORATE BROCHURE OF YOUR COMPANY. BUT WILL IT TRANSLATE INTO GREATER BRAND AWARENESS AND SALES? KRISTA MICALLEF TRIGONA FINDS OUT.

It is hard to believe that only fifteen years ago the internet was practically unheard of to most people, when today it plays such an important role in our personal and business life. Its impact is evident in the way we live, work, shop and interact with others. Since over 80 million users log on either through internet access accounts or online services, it is therefore essential that every business, no matter what size, is present on the web.

"Being online is a necessity not a luxury," Mr. Ian Castillo, Director at ICON asserts. "People expect you to have some degree of web presence. They want to learn more about your business and its offerings, they want to compare products or services, they expect to find you in Google's first results, and they want an easy way to contact you at their convenience."

As Mr. Castillo points out, the web was initially a one-to-mass medium allowing companies to merely showcase their portfolio online. However, the evolution of Web 2.0 allows businesses to interact with their customers at a deeper level. "Business can now interact with their audiences through reviews, comments, blogs, targeted adverts and social networks. Companies have also been setting up Facebook pages, Trip Advisor Accounts and LinkedIn Profiles along their website, building a relationship with in-



dividual clients and seeking a more human and individual rapport," Mr. Castillo adds.

So what does having a beneficial website entail? One of the primary basics that a business needs to think about when designing a website is content. "Visitors do not expect to view any content, but detailed content," Mr. Matthew Manderson, Head of Web and New Media at Media Consulta Malta Ltd says. He recommends that when establishing a website, "put yourself in the shoes of a browser and consider what you would like to see. Lack of details leave a potential customer in doubt, with competitors just a mouse click away."

Studies show that the most important content any website should include are your contact details. "These should be easy to find and as helpful as possible, with the right information, including telephone numbers, an easy to follow map, opening hours and so on," Mr. Manderson explains.

Visitors to your website are also looking for information about a business' products or services. "Websites should include information about prices, discounts or special offers as this will help maintain interest and thus close a sale. Furthermore, studies have shown that people love to view nice, clear images. Websites with large, easy to view





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images have better sales conversion rates.”

Ms. Claudine Cassar, Managing Director at Alert agrees, adding that “the more information the shop makes available, the easier it will be for the client to ensure that the product is what they are after. Images of products should therefore be displayed to maximum advantage. They should be clear and show off the product from different angles. Ideally, there should also be a zoom function allowing the consumer to enlarge the photo. Moreover, each image should be accompanied by a

clear description, including the dimensions,” she affirms.

“Businesses also need to look into is search engine optimisation. This is a vital tool,” Ms. Cassar maintains. “Do not expect customers to find your site unless you make the investment necessary to ensure that your business will be found. Work with a professional company to analyse your target keywords and collaborate with them to ensure that when someone is searching for the products you have on offer, your business will be at the top of the list,” she says, cautioning that “it is hard

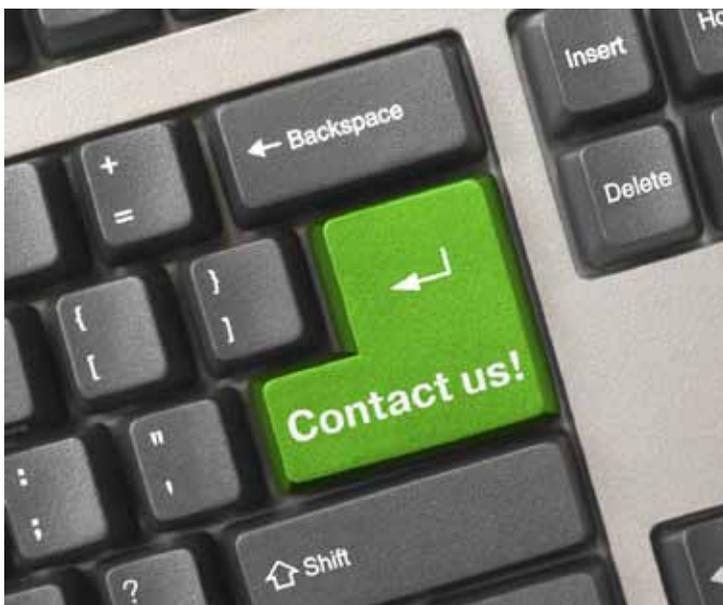
work, but worth it.”

Nowadays though, with so many competing websites online, simply having a presence on the web is not enough. “There are websites, and there are good websites,” Mr. Mark Cassar, Creative Director at CasaSoft says. “An unprofessional website will reflect negatively on your brand, and starts you off on the wrong foot. Whether it’s your corporate profile, online shop or portfolio, your web presence is your 24/7 sales pitch. So, it should be bold and effective!”

But how can you make your website stand out from all the rest? “Know your audience, research and keep it simple,” Mr. Cassar advises. “In order to stand out from the crowd, a great website must be visually stunning, highly responsive, innovative, interactive and very easy-to-use. Navigation should be trivial. Get your message out, short and sweet, but clearly, as users are simply too busy to read. Furthermore, you should grasp the full potential of today’s online marketing tools: integrate with social networks, be search engine friendly and ensure you have the right tools to easily keep your content fresh and up-to-date.”

Recently, Homes of Quality took





the initiative to upgrade their website, implementing new ideas and features, keeping the keywords 'enjoyable' and 'practical' in mind. "The HOQ website was originally set up around eight years ago, so it was beginning to look dated and needed a fresh new look," Mr Grahame Salt, Director at Homes of Quality says,

maintaining that revamping a website is a very time consuming and costly job. "We also wanted the website to appear amongst top listings on all search engines, so it had to be written with this in mind as well."

One of the primary aspects that HOQ looked into was designing a

site centred on user friendliness and plenty of large images. "HOQ deals with a niche market and we promote a selection of the best properties available on the Frank Salt Real Estate database, so these deserve to be showcased in a special way!"

Another factor that they have kept in mind is the customers that browse their website. "Many of the people who browse our website are not Maltese, and so may not be familiar with the different locations in Malta. We therefore created an easy map searching facilities."

Mr Salt also divulges that the website was established to customise itself around its clients' needs. "Browsers will be able to store their favourite properties and will be notified when prices change, as well as when new properties are registered that match their requirements."

The benefits of having a website are endless. Though it may be time consuming and costly, it is an essential tool for your business as it is now perceived to be a top customer requirement. An effective internet presence can be the difference between you and your competitors. ■

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