10 Mistakes Your Small Business Is Making Online

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Preface

In an effort to help educate small businesses, I've written this short book as a jump start to evaluating your current web-related efforts and assets. It will force you to consider how you present your business online, how you track performance (or don't), and where you focus your energy and money. Each chapter focuses on a mistake I commonly encounter working with small businesses across the United States. I see them every day. Hopefully your business isn't making all of these mistakes, but you're probably making a few.

1. Ignoring the Basics

Spelling and Grammar

Everything you publish online is a reflection of your business. Make sure your words represent you well. This applies to your website and blog, Facebook and Twitter, and elsewhere that's part of your online presence. It's been said that 9 out of 10 websites include misspellings and typos and I believe it. It continues to surprise me how often we find misspelled words on sites we're asked to survey. The same is true with grammar and punctuation. If you didn't major in English it's okay. Have an employee, your spouse, or a friend, review your content and give you some feedback. Then get in touch with your web professional and get it fixed.

Smilies, Chat Lingo and Text Talk

You know what I'm talking about. The cute little smiley faces and the shortened text talk like "LOL" and "IMHO". You might use it when you text or chat online. Its okay to use these lexica on your *personal* Facebook page or website, but don't let it spill into your business. We see it all the time online, but also in email. Avoid using the lingo in email conversations with your customers. It's unprofessional and I hear people complain about it regularly.

Topic Appropriateness

What you publish on the web often remains for years, so make sure it's appropriate and doesn't put your business in a bad light. Remember that tweets are often displayed in a feed on your website or elsewhere. Keep your topics business-appropriate. Many people have established a Twitter account for personal use and another for business. Separating them is a smart tactic, but anyone researching your business will easily find your personal accounts on Facebook, Twitter and foursquare as well. A conservative approach, the one I recommend, is to assume your prospective customers will see everything you put online.

Broken and Incorrect Links

It's frustrating when you encounter a broken link. You see something you want to know more about, you click the link, and it goes nowhere. Or worse yet, it goes to the wrong place. Don't irritate potential customers with bad links. When you link to external sites from your website, blog or Facebook page you're taking a chance. The source you've linked to may change. You can't control it and you won't know when it happens unless you regularly check your links. Bad links frustrate visitors and hurt your reputation in Google and the other search engines.

2. Getting Social without a Plan

Facebook, Twitter and the rest of the social media sites are free and very easy to begin. But don't jump into the social media pool just to jump in. Don't get started just because someone said you need to promote your business through social networking. The social media is a great way to extend your brand, attract new customers and strengthen your reputation as an expert in your industry. But without a plan, you'll regret ever signing up.

Consider this. With some social sites it can be difficult to remove your profile once you get started. Often there's no reset button, so you need to formulate a plan before you start.

To get started, answer these questions:

- How will your social media efforts drive traffic to your business?
- Will it integrate with your main website?
- Who will update your Facebook page? And how often?
- What will they be posting? Will you generate original content or link to others? Who approves content before it's posted?
- Is there a specific focus for your Facebook page (e.g. product or service promotions)?

Recognize the Risk

You should also be aware that your posts on some social media sites become public information and are retained forever. For example, in 2010 the US government struck a deal with Twitter to archive every tweet in the library of congress. As a result, your tweets are now becoming a part of history to be preserved forever.

The second element of risk to consider is the lack of control you have over social media and directory services. These services will evolve over time and it may affect you negatively. For example, Google Places recently changed how they display reviews from third party sources like Yelp and Demand Force. As a result, companies who relied heavily on those services saw their reviews disappear from Google Places overnight.

We can't control social media and directory sites; we just get to use them. This is one reason I always recommend focusing the most effort on the web assets you own. (More on this in mistake #6)

3. Stale Content

When was your last post on Facebook? When did you last tweet on Twitter? What's the date of your last blog entry or posting in the "latest news" section of your website? I call these "frequency-based elements", and they need to be fed. If your last post said "Merry Christmas from the team at XYZ Corp." and it's now June, you've got a problem.

Are you procrastinating? Are you just too busy? Don't know what to post? Or are you lacking a plan? (See mistake #2) Your answer isn't important because the end result is the same. Your company looks lazy and unconcerned with details. Plus, in a slow economy, people may simply assume you've gone out of business. Either way, they probably won't call to make an appointment, inquire about your product or service, or even bookmark your page. At this point, you've completely lost an opportunity.

You need to keep frequency-based elements up-to-date. Or just get rid of them. It's best to establish a schedule for keeping them fresh. I typically recommend at least a monthly update for news and blog posts, and at least a biweekly schedule for services like Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Your web professional should help manage these tasks.

A Freebie

This is an easy one. The copyright in the footer of your website shouldn't be 3 years old. We see it all the time and I just don't understand it. How does it look to potential customers when your footer says "Copyright 2009 XYZ Corp"?

It's especially frustrating to see this when prevention is so simple. For example, if your site uses PHP your web professional can simply use <?php echo date(Y); ?>. This will always display the current year, and prevent your website from appearing outdated.

4. Operating without Analytics

Analytics provides an easy means to track the performance and use of your website. I'm not talking about the basic statistics that come with your hosting account. Analytics provides insightful data that will educate your web-related decisions. The most popular solution is Google Analytics. It's powerful and free. We include it with every website we build, even when the client doesn't care to see it.

Google says their analytics is:

> *"...the enterprise-class web analytics solution that gives you rich insights into your website traffic and marketing effectiveness. Powerful, flexible and easy-to-use features now let you see and analyze your traffic data in an entirely new way."*

If your website doesn't have analytics installed you're missing a huge opportunity, and you should probably fire your web professional if they haven't mentioned it to you.

Ask yourself these simple questions: how many visitors does my site get? How long do they stay and what pages are the most popular? Where are my visitors located? How do people find my site? Was it through Google searching, referrals from other sites like my Facebook page, or my paid ads?

These questions are instantly answered with analytics. The data tells us about what's working and what's not. For example, did your last round of Tweets drive the expected amount of traffic to your site? Are website visitors taking the time read your testimonials?

Your web professional needs to be involved in the process of reviewing your site's performance, making recommendations and directing your decisions to focus more or less on various elements.

Making decisions without information is just guesswork. It's a waste of time and a waste of money.

5. Paying for Unnecessary Services

This is a big one. With so many companies offering search engine marketing (SEM), pay per click (PPC) advertising, and search engine optimization (SEO) it's hard to tell what's real, what works, and most importantly, what your business needs.

You know you want more traffic to your website so you can gain new customers, and everyone says their method is the best. "It's only $300 per month", or "$500 per month" or more. And "the contract is only 6 months" or "the contract is only 12 months" or more.

There are legitimate services that your company can truly benefit from. And others that are a total waste of money. Most importantly, a one-size-fits-all approach simply doesn't work. Some services mange your social media marketing. Maybe you need that. Some companies manage your PPC ad campaigns. Maybe you need that. Some companies create a separate website that will compete with your main site for traffic. Maybe you need that. But maybe you don't need any of it.

Only custom tailored services will truly benefit your company. That means you need someone who understands the available options, and takes the time to learn your business. Your web professional needs to evaluate your current assets and activities, understand their performance, and compare that

with the needs and budget for your business. When you have the right person it's not very hard to do.

6. Focusing on Web Assets you Don't Own

In an early draft of our Declaration of Independence, John Locke included the phrase "Life, liberty, and property" (also used previously in other founding documents like the Virginia Declaration of Rights). Although Jefferson and other the founders eventually settled on "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness", it's clear that property rights and retaining control of private property is a founding principle of our nation. Likewise, it's important to focus web-related efforts on that which you own, your assets.

You don't own your Facebook page or your Twitter account. You don't own your LinkedIn page or your foursquare account. And you might not own your website. It's critical to know what's yours and what you're renting. Many hosted web site solutions, like Go Daddy's Website Tonight, and Intuit's Small Business Websites are simply a leased service. You build the site and work to improve your ranking and reputation in Google. But if you decide to cancel the service, you lose everything. Not just the monthly service you were paying for, but the site and the reputation you built as well. The same is true with doorway page services, and many others.

Remember the Google Places example I mentioned in mistake #2? We can't control social media and directory sites because we don't own them. We just get to use them. So be careful

how much effort you invest in something that can change anytime.

Be clear about what you own; make it the center of your web presence, and focus the majority of your efforts there. You should utilize social media, directory sites, advertising, and networking sites to drive traffic, just monitor your level of dependence on them.

7. Misunderstanding Search Engine Optimization

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is undoubtedly the biggest buzz word in web. But why is that? And is it real?

SEO *is* real and the results are easy to see. What's the point in developing a great website if nobody sees it? Many web designers produce beautiful works of art that would surely convert customers. But potential customers don't find them.

Search optimization is a massive topic and an entire industry of its own. We won't go too deep here, but let's outline some basics. Most SEO techniques fall into one of two categories.

1. On-page Optimization - the efforts we take to optimize the website itself and the pages it contains. On-page optimization contains two sub-categories.
    a. Some efforts are considered "behind-the-scenes". These are modifications to the code itself, the configuration of the web server, support files, and third party services. These efforts are not observable by visitors as they have little effect on the visible elements of the website.
    b. The remaining on-page efforts directly affect the visible nature of web pages. They may include titles, text, images and navigation.

    The goal of on-page optimization is to improve a site's organic (non-paid) search rankings. These are the search

results found in the main area of a search engine results page (SERP).

2. Off-page optimization efforts do not manipulate the website itself. These include paid advertising, search engine marketing, social networking marketing and many others. In general, these are efforts put into other web assets with the goal of driving more traffic to (usually) the main website.

SEO is not a black magic, but it's hard to get web professionals to share their best tactics (myself included). We just keep our secrets safe because they take so long to develop them.

It's a mistake to get started with a web professional that can't get you found in search engines. And it's challenging to hand the project from a designer to a search optimizer.

It's a mistake to pay for SEO services that you don't feel comfortable with or understand. But it's also a mistake to avoid SEO completely. You need a qualified web professional who's willing to explain some of the concepts and outline what their services will do for your business.

8. Dabbling with Pay-per-Click Advertising

Pay-per-click (PPC) advertising can be a cost effective way to drive traffic to your site. Go to Google, do a search for a local service like "plumber san diego". Look at the results page that comes up. There will most likely be a beige section above of the results and another one in the rightmost column. These are paid ads using Google AdWords.

There are several PPC service providers, but Google AdWords is the most popular. They describe it as follows:

> *"No matter what your budget, you can display your ads on Google and our advertising network. Pay only if people click your ads."*

With PPC it's easy to establish an account, activate it with your credit card, select some keywords and never login again. That's what a lot of small businesses do. Compared to the other mistakes in the book, this really isn't a big one; especially if you've set a low daily budget. But it would be smarter to know how well your campaigns are doing, track the ROI and make good use of the money.

Much like jumping into the social media pool without a plan, PPC advertising will only yield results with careful attention. But unlike social media, you easily cancel PPC services at anytime without the risk of negative effects.

One Suggestion

We have seen companies use very high PPC budgets to sustain traffic to their website and gain new customers. If you're spending a lot on PPC, you should transition your efforts to on-page SEO. Beyond the initial costs for the SEO service itself, organic traffic is free. You will save thousands by improving your organic search performance and reducing the PPC budget.

9. Misunderstanding Content Management

Content management system (CMS) is another buzz word in web. A CMS allows you, the website owner, to self-manage the content of your site. Popular CMS's include WordPress, Joomla, and Drupal and others. I like WordPress.

The question is do you need a CMS? At first glance, you might be thinking why not. What could be the downside of having a system that I can self-manage, even if I never use it? If that's what you're thinking you may have a point. However, it may cost you more for your web professional to deliver a website with a CMS. In that case, you're paying more for something you might not use.

It's also important to know that not all elements of your website are easily manipulated with the CMS. At least that's usually the case. Again, you can have the CMS extended to provide more functionality, but is it worth the cost?

CMS's can offer unparalleled power and flexibility. We deliver both CMS and non-CMS websites. It's important to do what's best for the client and their business. Your web professional should discuss your needs and budget and set realistic expectations as to what can be self-managed and what can't.

10. Partnering with the Wrong Web Professional

Recognize that you need to develop a solid relationship with your web professional. The internet isn't going away and your need for an effective online presence will only increase. Work with someone you trust and like, because you will be working together for a long time.

Don't rush into a relationship just because you want something right now. Take a few minutes and learn a little about them. Review their website and ask a few questions about some of the projects they've done and their philosophy. Make sure their business model is compatible with yours.

It's not just about technical ability or design talent. Your web professional needs to be passionate about *your* business. They need to understand your business and your customers. Are they willing to take the time to learn these things? Your web professional should be business-minded, not just a great developer.

We hear it all time. The client's website was built by a previous company but they never received the support they desired. Now they're looking for someone new to help, but they're more cautious. It's hard to switch from resource to resource. It's time consuming and frustrating. Avoid being disappointed by selecting the right person the first time.

Consider these questions when evaluating a web professional:

- Are they professional?
- Are you comfortable with them? Are they easy to get a hold off, do they call you back in a timely manner?
- Do you trust them?
- Check their credentials. Do they publish testimonials? Do they appear to be legitimate?
- Do they display examples of their work for you to review?
- Is it clear that the web is their passion, or is it just their job?
- Do they outsource copyrighting, design, coding, database design, SEO or other parts of the process? Is this okay with you? Do you have "security of information" concerns with your business? Regardless of whether you're comfortable with domestic or overseas outsourcing, you should know in advance if it's going to be part of the process.
- Can you be honest and direct with them, and they you? Can you speak candidly?
- Is their pricing straightforward and upfront? Are you concerned there may be surprise costs later?

Before starting modMACRO I assumed pricing disagreements were the most common reason small businesses fire their web resource. It turns out that's not the case at all.

The most common reason I hear, and I hear it all the time, is a lack of professionalism and being "flaky". Clients complain

that their previous resource was slow to respond, lacked attention to detail and didn't take their concerns seriously.

If you're looking for an easy way to evaluate a web professional, you could start by asking them about a few of the mistakes in this book. See what they have to say about their firm and their philosophy. You should now be a little better equipped to survey your options and make smart decisions.

Take Action

Join the conversation.

Have comments on this book? Join the conversation and share your thoughts.
http://www.modmacro.com/business/10-mistakes-small-business-make-online/

About the Author

Matt runs modMACRO, a web firm that delivers tailor-made websites and web services for small businesses, startups and organizations that appreciate their web professional taking the time to understand their needs and their business. modMACRO solutions strengthen and extend the client's brand while providing measurable performance. Unlike a one-size-fits-all approach, modMACRO services are not pre-built, canned solutions.

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