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Learn from the best and the worst on the Web



E-BIZ

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The Internet is littered with Web sites — more than a few for small businesses — that are just plain bad. Many suffer from a wretched design that is guaranteed to chase visitors away as soon as they arrive.

To see just how bad they can get, check out Web Pages That Suck (**www.webpagesthatsuck.com**), a site that features some of the worst of the Internet. Despite its irreverent name, the site does an excellent job in outlining why so many Web page designs don't make the grade.

Beyond esthetics, many small-business sites fail because the entrepreneur hasn't determined the reason for the site before creating it. Far too many Web sites lack a strategic purpose, so they do little to achieve business objectives.

Many entrepreneurs rush off to create a site without first defining its objective. The result is something that not only looks bad, but likely damages the reputation of the small business.

This mistake is common to both big and small business. For example, one Fortune 500 company threw $250,000 (U.S.) at building a Web site without developing an on-line strategy.

To avoid such costly mistakes, make sure that you understand the range of strategic opportunities available to you using the Internet. These can involve marketing, on-line sales, cost reduction, public relations and customer support.

Next, figure out your on-line strategy. What are the key things you would like to accomplish? Do you want to build awareness of your company, or reduce customer support costs? Once you have done this, determine how the Internet can help you achieve those goals.

One of the best ways to do this is by researching some "best practices." Scour the Web to find sites of companies in your industry or area of work, and study what they have done.

Determine what you like and don't like within a wide range of comparable Web sites. Consider adapting the best of what you see for your site. Examine what appears to be the company's on-line strategies, as well as how the site's design helps to achieve them.

Then, map out your site on paper. It's best to fully conceptualize the site prior to design, so that you and your Web designer know exactly what needs to be done. Your efforts will also help to crystallize the site's strategic purpose.

At this point, you should be prepared to proceed with creating the site, either on your own or with the help of a designer. Finally, never consider that the strategic purpose of your site is frozen in time. Be willing to experiment and adapt, constantly learning from other entrepreneurs on the Web.

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