

# Mom & Pop Shops ...& the Internet

In a way, the internet leveled the playing field between mega stores and mom and pop shops. Mom and pops could compete in ways they never could before. It seemed to be the little guys that were the power behind the growth of the internet. Because of their size and flexibility, mom and pops were the first businesses to really use the internet as a sales channel. The corporations lagged far behind for many years.

In fact, quite a few mom and pops upped their status, developing a new kind of corporate identity. Jeff Bezos started a small online store to sell books and turned it into the behemoth known as Amazon.com, one of the largest online retailers in the world. Many other mom and pop stores enjoyed the ease of which they could develop a web presence and draw in traffic and sales. But as the e-marketplace began to grow, driving traffic to a new online business became increasingly difficult. While starting a business on the internet today is still relatively easy compared to doing so off-line, it has become more expensive and time consuming than ever.

It used to be that web developers were paid for, well, developing web sites. Any more, that is the smallest piece of the web developer's job. Blogs and other readily available, inexpensive and free programs make it easy for novices to build decent-looking and functioning sites. The magic, the "secret" knowledge and services needed by business owners has become in the field of search engine marketing. Not surprisingly, the cost of optimization firms and consultants has skyrocketed. It seems that the cost of SEO is getting out of reach for many mom and pop business owners. Many well-known consultants charge up to \$500/hour. One hour can get you a lot of advice and good information, but that leaves the hard work up to the business owner. If you hire a web marketing firm you might end up paying anywhere from \$10,000 to \$100,000 per year. \$10,000/year is considered relatively cheap.

These costs for marketing are making the online environment less viable for new businesses on limited budgets. It's certainly not impossible. Those that can and will invest the time to learning what they need to know and then dedicate the time and effort to the implementation of their knowledge can still succeed online. But the more competitive the field is the more difficult and time consuming the marketing aspects become, especially for one who may already be tapped out trying to run the business.

So while smaller businesses could initially enjoy easy success online, that is no longer the case. Unfortunately, many still have grand dreams of starting a business in a competitive field and instantly turning it into

a thriving company. By and large, that's not going to happen. New sites take more time than ever to rank well in the search engines as trust and reputation need to be established. This is especially important when competing against other companies that have spent years developing their trust and reputation online. There is really no reason why a new site should outperform an older site in the same industry, until that new site has been able to prove they are valuable, reputable, trustworthy, and unique. And not just because the owner of the business says so! These things have to be well established online.

So what's a mom and pop store to do? That answer depends on what the goals of the business owner are. Are you comfortable being a mom and pop shop or do you have bigger dreams and ambitions?

## Staying Mom & Pop

If you're fine being a mom and pop shop in the online marketplace then you need to recognize that your place is probably not among the top 10 search results in a competitive industry. There is nothing wrong with that, just like there is nothing wrong with a local hardware store not being a Home Depot or Lowes. The local store gets locals who don't want to take the drive to the larger hardware stores. But we all know that the Home Depot gets a whole lot more business than the local store.

Even online, mom and pop stores need to be content with their place in the business world. You realize that you'll never own the largest store of your kind offline—nor do you want to—and you should also accept the same online. You don't need to be #1 to run a successful mom and pop business.

Now, if you have greater ambitions than just being a mom and pop store, well, that changes everything. But before that changes your desire to be on the first page of search results, it needs to change your drive, motivation, and financial investment as well. You need to apply some of the same off-line business starting strategies for your online store. This includes creating a business plan and perhaps even finding some financial backing or outside investors. Again, this is most important for those starting a business in more competitive industries.

While the barriers to starting a business online are still less than starting one off-line, the mind-set of success shouldn't be. Succeeding in any environment and earning first page placement for your keywords requires much more than building a web site. It requires time, determination, willingness to spend or learn more about marketing, and patience. There are very few overnight success stories online and those that there are usually come from new and innovative ideas.



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It's not about what we do. It's about what our process and products do for you.

There is nothing wrong with finding something you can do in order to build your business, even if it's already being done. Target and Wal-Mart compete with many of the same, or similar, products and you can too. But you need to know what drives you and what your motivation is and how you define success. Once you know this, set your online expectations accordingly. You don't have to invest thousands of dollars in a marketing campaign in order to be successful online, but if you want to move out of mom and pop status, then you need to be willing to run and invest in your business as any other non mom and pop business would.

## Getting Started

1. **Get your own domain name and register it for several years.** With a successful business, spending 50 dollars to register your domain for the next five years is a no-brainer.

2. **Get a decent host** – for a local small business web site that doesn't envision mounds of traffic or a complicated web site setup, you can find a ton of affordable and reliable hosting options for 10-15 dollars per month. Pay the 1-2 dollars extra per month for a unique IP address (your host will know what that means).

3. **Set up an e-mail address using your domain.** Your hosting plan will come with a minimum of one free e-mail address and your host should have instructions on how to setup and configure your mail client to check that e-mail. `me@mybusiness.com` looks much more professional than `me432@yourisp.net`.

4. If you don't know how to make a "great web site" **either hire a web designer or keep it simple** with a basic background color, fonts and real life pictures (if applicable). I'd recommend the web designer for a nominal fee. Remember, the web site will be the first impression of your business to online users.

## What to put on your home page:

1. Make sure your business name, what you do, where you do it, who you do it for and why you're the best at it all appear on the home page in text. Be short and sweet (they can visit other pages of the site for in depth information on those topics) but also be descriptive.

2. Your address, phone number and e-mail address should appear on every page in text. Be sure to list this information in full, including street address, city, state and zip code. List the phone number with area code.

3. Hours of operation.

4. Cities you serve in your local area.

## Other pages you should have at a minimum:

1. **About page** - This is where you go in depth on your company. Give a detailed, but not too long (think essay, not thesis), explanation on what you do, how long you've been doing it, what makes you the best at it and why customers should choose you above the competition.

2. **Services or Products page(s)** - Tell them what you do and what you can provide to them. Add pricing information if you feel it is appropriate. If you do something that has a "finished result" such as landscaping, pool construction, paint jobs, room additions, etc. consider adding pictures of past work – as they say, pictures (that are resized properly using a graphics or photo editing program) can be worth 1000 words (but be sure to add descriptions of what the pictures show in text).

3. **Contact page** - Tell visitors how to get a hold of you. This includes your full address, phone number, e-mail address, fax number, additional locations (if applicable with all of their pertinent information as well), hours of operation, a map (you can easily get one online via major mapping sites) and directions from one or two major roads in the vicinity. Be sure you list a privacy policy on the site if you have any forms for users to fill out telling them what you will and won't do with their information. Make sure you check e-mail often and are timely in responses to inquiries.

4. **Coupon page** (optional) – If you want to know when new referrals are coming from your web site, tell people to mention that they found you via your web site for a nominal discount.

## Managing Your Site

1. **Content is EVERYTHING.** Almost all the search engines scan a sites content now - almost ignoring things like meta tags. People like content too. Ask yourself - why would people come to your web site? Do you offer them interesting and informative information that relates to your product or service? If not, why would they come?

Relevant content and lots of it is a key for a successful web site. You can never have too much. Set aside at least an hour a week to devote to adding new content to your web site.

2. **Freshness: Keep it current.** Having lots of content is great - but if it is all three years old it's not going to look like your site is much of a priority. The search engines actually track this. They monitor how frequently your site changes as they visit it for indexing. The more often it changes the better your rank in the freshness category.

What constitutes change? Pretty much anything - which is why keeping a BLOG or adding frequent news articles to your web site usually produces such good results.

3. **No Tricks.** Don't try to outsmart the Search Engines - Eventually you'll lose. Many web companies promise success through the use of tricks, back doors, and special tactics designed to sneak a web site into a top position rapidly. Something, of course, that the search engines are constantly battling to defeat. Why play the game? It's expensive and, unless you're building a porn site, it doesn't bring you the traffic you want anyway. Worse, if the search engines catch you doing it, there will be a LOT of work and money to get back to the top.

Follow the recommendations of the search engines - most set out rules for web masters that outline what they would like to see in a site. By following the rules, the engines are actually battling all the cheating web sites and working to promote the sites that follow the rules - they are fighting FOR you!

4. **Links both in and our must be relevant.** There was a time when all links were created equal and the more you had—pointing at you or pointing from you—the better. It's simply no longer true. In fact, links that point to or from sites that have nothing to do with your site's content can actually harm you.

Do you have a links page? Kill it. It is far better to have relevant links placed throughout your web site, along with text that puts them in context, text that relates specifically to the information on the page to which you are linking.

5. **Structure: Organize your web site and everyone will thank you.** Both the search engines and your web visitors prefer a web site that is well structured. The search engines will rank you better if they can easily find all your pages. People will stick around longer (and thus be more likely to buy your product or service) if they can quickly and easily find what they're looking for.

Structure your site with headings and bulleted lists which are easy to visually scan. Liberally use images that help visitors find content. Make headings, use the correct coding tags for them, organize sections of content into groups, and use bold and bulleted lists to present key points. Keep in mind when writing paragraphs of text that most humans will not read them unless they are specifically titled with a headline that matches what they are looking for. It isn't rocket science, but it is often overlooked.

6. **Accessibility: The more the merrier!** Think about your site - can someone with a visual disability (perhaps even something as simple as color-blindness) still get information about your product or service? There are many simple ways that you can ensure your web site is accessible to people with special needs. A group of simple tests for the sites content and design that ensure your product or service is presented to the widest possible audience. The specifics are beyond the scope of this document - but be sure that you check with your designer to ensure that your site design and code is following accessibility guidelines. The Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) provides a list of guidelines for how to create web sites that are accessible to as many people (and systems) as possible.

7. **Quality Code: Well coded web sites perform better.** Standard compliant code that has been checked for errors is easier for the search engines to assimilate. It is more widely visible across varied platforms (computer types) and in different browsers.

Ensure your web designer is writing standard compliant code that is validated for errors. You can also check your own web site using free on-line tools from the W3C (The World Wide Web Consortium - the standards body that administers Internet technologies)

8. **URLs: It's more than just your domain name.** If you are using a content management system to build your site, or portions of your site, it is important to understand the significance of the URL used to access pages on your web site.

Search engines look at the address of every page on your web site and try to extract key-words from the content of the url. For example, you may have a page about "Widgets" on your web site called "some-

where.com" creating the page with a filename of widgets.html will give a better keyword rank than page6.html this is also true of sub-directories on the site somewhere.com/widgets/... being better than somewhere.com/files/...

This is a fairly subtle point but makes a significant difference for most search engines. It can also make it much easier for people that are typing in a URL to access a specific page of your web site.

9. **Style: Looks do matter - but perhaps not the way you think...**

In the grand scheme of things the "looks" of a web site in the classic sense are not really that important - honestly! Once people have looked at a web site for a few minutes they will quickly discard their first impression (based on looks) and move immediately to asking - is this site giving me the information I need - and can I find it quickly (going back to tips #1 - content and #5 - structure)

So what are we on about with style? Simple - ensure the style of your site makes it easy to read. Avoid things like black backgrounds with white text (inverse text is harder to read) ALL CAPS (humans read by identifying word shapes - writing in all caps forces people to read every letter and quickly becomes annoying - plus on the net it is used as an typographic method of indicating you are screaming) You should also check your web site using a color blind test to ensure that visitors with the various types of color-blindness can still actually read your navigation.

10. **Images: Selling a product - better make sure it looks good**

If you are selling something that has a visual representation - then professional looking photography is key. Even a multi-million dollar resort will not look good if the photographs are amateurish. If you care about what you have to sell, then it's worth investing in some professional photographs to show people what you have. Remember, on-line people can't get a hold of your product - so you need to give them some really good photographs so that they can feel confident that it meets their needs.

## **Making your new web site search engine friendly:**

1. **Make sure the titles tags on each page are unique and include some keywords** you think people would type into a search engine while trying to find your site. I.e. if you do landscaping in Clearwater, Florida your home page title tag might be: "Professional Landscaping Services in Clearwater, Florida — Your Company" (no quotes). Every page on your site should have a title tag that reflects the content specific to that page.

2. **Make sure the meta description tag on each page contains a sentence that serves as a mini-advertisement for your company** that makes people want to find out more as it may appear at times under the title of your web site in Google and other search engines. Be sure the description is not only promotional, but informational about your company and web site.

3. **Make sure the designer doesn't use flash (for the entire web site) or JavaScript links to navigate your site.** For a myriad of reasons you don't care about, I assure you this is very bad if you have any hopes of people finding your web site in the search engines.

4. **Add some links to your web site that are useful to people looking for information about your services.** I.e. if you belong to an association (like an attorney would to the bar), if you have a partnership with a related business (you build pools, so you list a few recommended pool maintenance companies), if you can refer people to sources of additional information (such as an accountant pointing to various documents on the IRS web site that may be helpful to consumers) – these are all great links to add to your site. You can work these links into your regular pages or create an additional page for resource links.

### Online promotion of your new web site:

1. Get your business listed with Google maps (free):  
<https://www.google.com/local/add/login>
2. Use Google's Webmaster Tools (free):  
<http://www.google.com/webmasters/>
3. Get your business listed with SuperPages.com (free; fee option):  
<https://my.superpages.com/spweb/products/business-listing>
4. Update your business listings with infoUSA.com (free)  
<http://list.infousa.com/dbupdate.htm>
5. Get a listing in Best of the Web in their regional section (fee):  
[http://botw.org/top/Regional/United\\_States/](http://botw.org/top/Regional/United_States/) (click submit site at the top right of the page once you find your proper category)
6. Get a listing with Yahoo Local (free; fee options):  
<http://searchmarketing.yahoo.com/local/business.php>
7. Find the category that matches your business and get listed with Dmoz.org (free): <http://www.dmoz.org>
8. Get listed in MSN local:  
<http://www.localeze.com/manage/>
9. Get listed with citysearch.com (also powers the Ask local search) for a fee: <https://selfenroll.citysearch.com/>
10. Get listed with local.com (free; fee options):  
<http://www.local.com/advertise.aspx>
11. Get listed with yellowpages.com (free; fee options):  
<http://www.yellowpages.com/sp/advertise/>

Don't forget to talk with friends, family, businesses you have partnerships with that have web sites and any associations you may belong to (such as a chamber of commerce) to see if they would be willing to link to your web site to help promote your business.

Remember to promote your site offline as well by mentioning it on all your marketing materials and to current customers. And then get back to doing business. Your web site should be positioned well in the coming weeks on specific search terms to your local market and service as well as being visited from local people following your offline marketing efforts and finding the information they're looking for on your web site.



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It's not about what we do.

It's about what our process and products do for you.