

## **UPDATING YOUR WEBSITE**

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Imagine for a moment that you are a shop keeper – perhaps an owner/manager of a department store – what is the one thing that you would do every day? I suggest that you would walk past and look at your shop window, then walk through the store looking at the displays, you would chat with the staff to be sure they were up to date and enthused – then you would walk to your office to check on takings/stock/new products/problems etc.

So why is it that so many SMEs in industry think that they can spend some money on a website and then forget it?

Sadly, some subsidiary MDs have no choice since their head office IT department has complete control and many of these do not seem to really understand or be adequately resourced to properly manage an online presence in the UK. If you are in this situation – consider funding a blog site from your advertising budget.

In the days before the internet companies would produce a brochure then maybe print another one when the stock was used up, sometimes years later. Now that kind of thinking simply will not do.

Your internet presence is your shop window – whether it is your website, your blog, your video channel or your social media activity. You should be looking at it every day and discussing with your sales people how it could be improved – “walk to work” and view your shop window the way your customers do - online. Even phone your sales desk occasionally with an enquiry while on your own website – e.g. “I’m looking for a green widget and I’m on your website but can’t find the green ones with cantilever grommets – can you help me please?” to make sure your own people are able to use this powerful sales tool.

So what to do about your website? Firstly change company thinking – this is no longer a once a year task – it is continuous and on-going - if there was a water leak it would get fixed straight away before the loss and damage became significant. Every day that a company website is not bringing customers to your door or is not fulfilling their enquiries, it is leaking away sales and damaging your profits. It absolutely must be fixed - and that is in the same vein as sharpening tools or recalibrating instruments, investing in new production equipment or replacing poor packaging. It is not an option – and if you try to fix it by quick fix promotions then they will be short lived, because internet authority will not be transferred from the promotion to the site and so when the promotion stops the authority is lost. You can of course continue to promote – in itself a very good thing – but without a good

website the effect continuously leaks away – a good website allows authority to accumulate so you are not continuously running just to stay still.

Secondly have a plan – however vague or defined. In broad outline it could look something like this:

1. Review the website design continuously – make frequent small changes to enhance the presentation and usability, notice when it gets stale and step change the evolution with a redesign e.g. every 1 to 3 years.
2. Review and add content continuously, e.g.:
  - new products
  - data sheets
  - guides to application, installation, maintenance etc.
  - new services
  - blog posts
  - newsletters
  - exhibitions program
  - whitepapers
  - videos
3. Review the structure to accommodate new content or design, e.g. if the site becomes cumbersome to navigate, or slow to load. Ensure that you avoid 404 errors by referring old page addresses to new pages.
4. Keep building your site and ensure that it is fully searchable and accessible to UK regional searches.

Which brings us to the “how to do” part. We have successfully used a system called WordPress for many years – there are a number of others and I imagine that similar comments apply. WordPress is well suited to SMEs and to those who take a DIY approach. It is a free and open source blogging tool and content management system (CMS) which runs on a web hosting service and is extremely popular - there are over 60 million WordPress-built websites in existence. Importantly support is huge - there are thousands of websites and forums out there which can help you learn more about WordPress and how to use it. Of course if you would rather not DIY then there are many specialist marketing companies who can do it for you.

Historically WordPress started in 2003 as just a blogging system but has now evolved into a full content management system through the thousands of themes, widgets and plugins available, by far the majority of which are free to download and use, although there is a thriving market in

commercial packages which often have significant advantages at reasonable cost. Themes are basically designs and layout templates which can be customised and usually come with a base loading of widgets and plugins e.g. for SEO (Search Engine Optimisation). Widgets and plugins are separate modules which provide added functionality e.g. presenting rotating pictures or social media streams, tag clouds or other search facilities.

We have found WordPress to be very intuitive such that anyone with a good understanding of software such as Microsoft Word will be able to use its basic features. When you create a page you see two tabs “Visual” and “Text”. You create the page in the “Visual” tab, using features which will be very familiar to users of Microsoft Word. All the coding is done for you behind the scenes in the “Text” tab. If you are going to delve deeper and use the more advanced features a basic understanding of html (Hypertext Mark-up Language) is helpful. To assist you there are a multitude of websites out there where you can learn about html and even get whole lines of code which you just need to paste in to your text page to give you a huge variety of different formatting options.

Creating a website is just the beginning – administratively it is also important to keep the site updated so it continues to work smoothly and effectively, not just for your visitors, but also for the search engines that will put your site in front of potential customers. WordPress itself releases regular updates which are notified to you through the dashboard so you can run them as soon as you get notified.

Much of the added functionality and features that can make a site more usable are created using plugins. Widgets are plugins you can use in sidebars and sometimes in the main pages - they include

- search boxes
- tag clouds
- contact boxes
- social media links
- facebook/twitter connectivity
- subscribe boxes
- image display

Other plugins can be searched for and downloaded directly from your dashboard. Popular examples include:

- custom contact forms
- sitemap: works in the background making sure that search engines can find and index your website
- post sharers: enables people to easily and quickly share your blog posts/website pages
- missed schedule: ensures that scheduled blog posts always go out on time

- short links: enables you to shrink, track and share those long URLs into short, search engine friendly ones

This means that functionality is not fixed but rather can be fluidly developed by the addition of new modules – or replacement of old modules with newer better ones. All of these plugins need to be maintained and updated; again they are notified regularly through your dashboard and can be run from there.

So by regarding your website/blog/video-channel/social-media as the company shop window industrial SMEs can lift their business from the limitations of intermittent catalogue production and out of date information – not to mention the problems not having information available on new products.

So the company website has replaced the company brochure – but more than that it is also replacing the company exhibition stand – it truly is even more than your shop window – it is often your sales counter as well and deserves the degree of frequent attention that implies.