www.yoursite.com

Connect

Spread the word

Over 2.5 million web pages are accessible from a PC but your company still hasn't got round to setting up its own site. Duncan Peberdy talks you through the options of getting your business online – whether it's an e-commerce site or simply an interactive advertisement

A website today is more relevant to your business than a Yellow Pages ad was just a few years ago – it might even cost you less than a telephone directory advert. So what's stopping you from becoming an active part of the world's largest information provider?

Whatever your line of business a website is bound to be beneficial. It's an inexpensive marketing tool – a place where people from anywhere in the world can learn about your products and services 24 hours a day. It acts as a virtual shopfront and, even if it provides only basic information and isn't capable of handling online transactions, it can make a small firm look like a big player.

Not all sites are commercial, of course. A website that's devoted to interests, achievements, views and hobbies allows you to tell the world about yourself.

If not knowing how to go about creating a website is all that's stopping you from taking the plunge then you've come to the right place. And if you're afraid paying someone else to design and host your site might turn into a bottomless pit of expense, fear not.

Tales abound of small businesses unknowingly committing themselves to an expensive 10-year relationship with a web host, but such pitfalls are easy to avoid if you know where they're likely to appear. As you'll see from the following few pages,

costs needn't be over the top. In any case, with a bit of no-nonsense advice you could even do it yourself.

Payment or publicity?

Before you talk to anyone about designs and costs, you must decide what your website is trying to achieve. If you sell products that customers are likely to order while sat in front of a computer screen, you should aim for a site that enables people to order online using a credit card or prearranged account.

A complete transaction that takes place over the internet with no human contact whatsoever is known as e-commerce. But this isn't the only type of site you can create – the vast majority of businesses use the internet to simply advertise their wares. Rather than taking out a half-page black-and-white ad in the local paper, the internet gives you the opportunity to sell your products and services via a full-colour and interactive website.

Finally, there's a third type of site that just presents information without advertising anything. These are usually restricted to public service providers – libraries, local government and the like.

Paper before paperless

Having decided to embark on a purely promotional website, make a list of the elements of your business that you want

to push. Do you have a unique product or service? Have you won an award for your customer care? Trawl the internet and note down websites related to your area of business and any sites (whatever their content) that contain elements you think work particularly well. You can't copy them, but looking at different sites will give you some ideas for what to include and what to leave out.

You really don't want pictures of your sales director's newborn baby on your business site, but a picture of her receiving a business award gives you the opportunity to tell everyone why your company won. And while you're at it, why not put a feedback form on your site? Anyone looking at your site late at night is more likely to fill out a concise form than remember to phone you in the morning. You might generate a number of additional sales leads in this way.

Can you go it alone?

Having worked out what you'd like your site to contain, you need to decide whether to pay someone to turn it into a live project. It's not merely a question of money, but also one of time, control and in-house capabilities. On the face of it all that is required is the uploading of some smartly designed pages. Look a little deeper, though, and you'll see that the real issues are more complex.

First, where do you obtain a domain name? Second, who is going to host your pages? The company will need to be on a web server giving round-the-clock accessibility. Third, have you really got the creative know-how to achieve the design quality that you want potential customers to see?

• Choosing a name There are lots of sites that verify whether the domain name you want is available: www.netbenefit.com is quick and reliable. Remember that the shorter and snappier you can make the name the more easily it will be remembered by clients. Don't register your URL with the first company you see. They might be offering registration for just a few quid, but could then overcharge for hosting or for moving the name to another host. Shop around to ensure a good deal.

International registration of a domain name lasts for two years, after which time you will have the first refusal to re-register it. If you use an ISP to register the name and host your site, insist the name is registered with your details rather than those of the ISP. Should your ISP go bust you will be able to move your site to a new host without too much trouble.
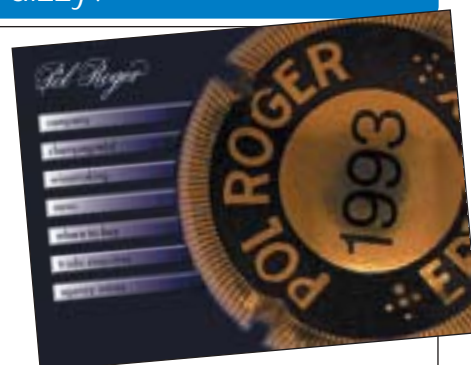
• A genial host The pages of computer magazines, especially those specialising in the internet, carry adverts galore for web-hosting services. But before you sign any agreement make sure you fully understand all the charges that will apply. One favourite limitation is bandwidth, or

Case study one fizzy or dizzy?

We can all learn from the experience of winemaker and distributor Pol Roger (www.polroger.co.uk). Established in the UK in 1990, it now employs 12 people and has an annual turnover of £3m. When Pol Roger originally commissioned its website the firm had three main objectives: to incorporate the latest technology, to make a visual impact and to ensure that pages were downloaded within 15 seconds. Unfortunately the last point got lost somewhere between Pol Roger's advertising agency and the web design company.

What the firm got – for about the price of an average family saloon – was a fantastic-looking site designed with Flash animation. But pages loaded so slowly visitors could not be bothered to wait and took their custom elsewhere. Two years ago, when 56K dialup was the internet norm, Pol Roger's home page took around four minutes to load and, worse than that, a progress monitor bar drove home just how slow it was. The wait was perhaps not so bad if you were already enjoying a glass of Pol Roger's sumptuous White Foil Champagne, available to order from a faster Oddbins or Majestic website.

Obviously the site was not developed as originally intended. It should have included details of retail outlets, tasting notes and an exclusive trade-only area for its independent retailers. It would be fair to say that Pol Roger's first website has been an expensive learning curve for the winemaker. At least it knows exactly where it went wrong – and what its next site must be capable of providing.

registration, £9.99 setup charge and 24 monthly payments of £8.99). Smaller ISPs can charge as little as £125 for registration and two year's web hosting, but the range of services provided do not come close to 1&1 Internet's.

aiming for a simple, uncluttered layout, concise use of words and eye-catching graphics with plenty of white space on the page.

What about Flash animation or video? Some would argue that if you have to include gimmicks to get your site noticed then the design is flawed. Realistically, if your site takes too long to load the casual browser will get bored waiting and click away to a competitor's site. However, with more and more users now having faster internet access, such as an always-on broadband connection, this should be less of problem.

Just like fast cars and catwalk models, your site has to look good as well as work impeccably

data transfer rates. Bandwidth governs the total size of all files transferred to web surfers from your site. For example, if your home page is 30KB in size and 200 people a month visit it, this will be a total of 6,000KB (6MB) of bandwidth. ISP 1&1 Internet, which charges £8.99 per month to host your site, allows businesses a data transfer rate of 10,000MB per month. Over a two-year period this will cost a total of £271.13 (domain name

• Look at me Good web design is not just about the choice of words and graphical images; it relies equally on the programming of the page itself. Can you manipulate images so they load quickly and look the same on your customer's PC? If you use a font that isn't installed on a surfer's PC, it will not appear as you intended it to. Just like fast cars and catwalk models, your site has to look good as well as work impeccably. You should be

Designing your own site requires a firm control over the size of your graphic images – a photo used straight from a digital camera will be too big for online use. Image-manipulation software, such as Paint Shop Pro (£69.99, www.jungle.com), can remove or crop unwanted areas of your photo and compress the file size – using Jpeg or BMP format – so your image loads quickly. You'll find a trial version of Paint Shop Pro on this month's cover disc.

If you decide to use photographs on your site then you will find ProJpeg an invaluable utility. This add-on for Paint Shop Pro and Adobe Photoshop can compress a Jpeg graphic by more than 50 percent. Download it from www.boxtopsoft.com for $49.95 (about £32).

Of course, you'll also need a program with which to create your site. But have you really got time to learn the intricacies and quirks of a new software package? It might be more prudent to put the price of the software towards the total cost of outsourcing to a specialist.

Alternatively, there are dozens of web-design packages ranging from shareware to programs costing hundreds of pounds. Don't dismiss the basic web page templates included with your existing software such as Microsoft Word and Lotus SmartSuite. Some web hosts even include site creation functions as part of their hosting packages.

Codewords

The early days of web design were clouded in mystery because designs were constructed with complex strings of HTML code. With software today the need for programming in HTML is obsolete, as the software converts text and graphics into code without you even knowing it.

One of the most popular web design packages is Microsoft's FrontPage (£128 from www.dabs.com). This application provides a good selection of templates and, if you're familiar with Word and Publisher, it's easy to produce stylish web pages quickly.

If you really want to keep down the cost of DIY web designing then the latest versions of Word and Publisher will convert documents to web-ready pages. Simply create your page layout in Word and choose the WebPage format option in the Save dialog box. Using the File, 'Create a Web Site from the Current Publication' option, Publisher can even check your layout for any potential design and performance problems.

Once your pages are designed, you need to transfer them to the web. Globalscape's CuteFTP is one of the most popular utilities for doing just that and the company now offers an inexpensive web

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design solution. CuteSite Builder can be purchased online for $69.95 (around £45). Not only does this software come with a good selection of templates, but users who have created their own templates can share them online too.

CuteSite Builder is aimed at home users, educational institutions and small businesses. Download a full copy from www.globalscape.com – you can even evaluate it for 30 days before registering.

Favoured among professional web designers is Macromedia's Dreamweaver (£351 from www.dabs.com, and we've used this as the basis of our *Build your own website* workshop on page 122).

If your skills extend only to Microsoft Office, FrontPage will give you the basic Dreamweaver features without such a steep learning curve.

Skills? What skills?

Speednet (www.speednetonline.com) is not so much a software package as a control system that cleverly 'deskills' the web design process. Once a website template incorporating company logos, graphics and menus, has been created, content for individual pages is compiled using Microsoft Word. Speednet provides tips to generate eye-catching layouts, showing you how to integrate tables, graphs, charts and photos into your Word documents. Not convinced? Check out www.training3.com – this site was built using Speednet and Word.

Using the browser-based Speednet Management Console, the site administrator simply 'points and clicks' to send finished pages to the web server. As the pages have been created using Word, any additions and alterations can quickly be made and republished. Consequently, the days are over of waiting for your web design company to make the changes, which can be both slow and expensive.

For a medium-sized business the functionality of Speednet is excellent. For £1,500 you get a professionally designed template to build your pages around. For larger companies and voluntary organisations, Speednet offers unique functionality that would cost considerably more to have programmed elsewhere.

Speednet can be configured to allow users to create and modify specific pages only. Without any specialist web knowledge, departments can be responsible solely for maintaining their own pages using Word. Not only will Speednet manage your site, but larger organisations can use it to create and maintain an intranet too. Check out the trial version of Speednet on the CD.

Marketing your site

A vital part of your website are the metatags. These are lines of text 'hidden' behind the top of your design and are primarily used to inform search engines about the site content. If you are an electrician the keywords need to contain vocabulary that somebody looking for your services might enter into a search engine – for example, electrician, wiring, rewiring, cookers, heating, inspection, testing, repairs, showers, general lighting, plugs,

Case study two we've got it covered

Resitex Coatings (www.resitexcoatings.co.uk) is a Yorkshire-based company that manufactures specialist thermoplastic coatings – principally the exterior finishes that you see on Portakabins and Park Homes.

Traditionally its customers had been the manufacturers of these buildings, but Resitex was increasingly being called upon to supply its coatings to Park Home owners who wanted to repaint their residences. The company believed that a website would be good for generating additional business, but in the end it took over 12 months before Resitex had an online presence. The holdup was due to a lack of knowledge over who to turn to for advice. Resitex Coatings finally chose a small company which not only looked after design and hosting, but also provided practical advice on how to market products using email.

Resitex Coatings' site finally went live in August 02. Although the season for repainting was effectively over, within a couple of weeks the company was receiving enquiries and orders as a result of its website and email marketing campaign. The total cost of Resitex's website, inclusive of two year's hosting and a day's marketing advice, was just under £1,100.

sockets, door access control, landlord certification, emergency lighting and standby generators.

The description is a sentence or two but short and to the point, summarising the content of your site. Search engines use a set amount of characters in the descriptions they display, so if yours is too long – say, more than 25 words – it will be cut short. There are so many search engines that knowing which ones use all metatags is difficult. For example, www.exite.co.uk does not use keywords but uses your description for the site summary instead.

Search engines gather their information in two ways. Spiders or webbots are software instructions issued by search engines to retrieve web page content for inclusion in their database. Every page of your website should therefore use keywords and a description – this will give it a better chance of being found by search engine browsers.

The second way is to manually submit details of your website to the search engine. With over 2.5 million pages on the web, getting yours noticed is no mean feat. Free manual submission to a search engine rarely has the effect of getting your site towards the top of search engine lists.

The alternative is to pay to have your site information submitted, but unfortunately we don't all have the resources of Lloyds Bank. In August last year Lloyds reputedly paid Google.co.uk a £1m fee to provide over 1,000 insurance-related keywords that would guarantee Lloyds top listings from insurance-related searches over the next 12 months.

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But even without corporate advertising budgets at your disposal, it's surprising what you can achieve for a modest outlay. The website www.ineedhits.com offers paid-for search engine submissions from just US$9.99 (about £6.50). This doesn't buy you a lot of success, but a $39 (around £25) service that submits information to MSN and AOL search engines is worth every penny.

Ineedhits.com also offers a paid-for analysis service to help with your keywords and descriptions.

Working directly with Google.co.uk, you can set up a marketing campaign that only costs you when a customer clicks on a link and actually visits your site. You determine how much you want to pay for each referral, but if another company has agreed a higher amount to be linked with the same search criteria they will be listed above you. Submit-it.com is another provider of paid-for search engine submission run by Microsoft.

I want to sell it now

If you want to sell your products over the web then all the aforementioned considerations and guidelines apply, along with some new ones. While there are plenty of software packages that allow you to create a virtual online shop, you still need to plan your venture properly.

With little knowledge about websites, let alone e-commerce, a retailer of Disable Aids was persuaded by a slick salesman to splash out a considerable sum of money for an e-commerce site.

The website looked good and informed potential customers about Disable Aids' products and services. At first it appeared to do the trick, but two things let the site down. The first was that you could only buy a choice of seven items online, which was nowhere near enough for a company selling hundreds of product lines.

Disable Aids also soon discovered that people wishing to purchase wheelchairs, stairlifts, commodes and so on wanted to see and discuss their requirements with a specialist. An advertising website with a good feedback/enquiry form would have been a much better option for both the

company and its customers. It would also have been a more cost-effective solution.

If you're planning an e-commerce site you'll need to set up an arrangement to accept credit card payments online. Off-the-shelf packages such as Actinic (www.actinic.co.uk) or Shopsite (www.shopsite.com) allow integration with payment providers such as Netbanx (www.netbanx.com), WorldPay (www.worldpay.com) and Datacash (www.datacash.com).

Your high street bank can also provide this facility. But before you head off down the e-commerce route, check out the charges involved. Internet-credit-card-processing.co.uk, for example, charges a setup fee of £275, a monthly fee of £10.50 and a processing commission rate of 5.5 percent. Your goods need to have a healthy profit margin if your business is going to absorb these costs.

Sight for sites

We tend to take it for granted everyone can see our fantastic, Flash-animated websites, but in the UK alone there are two million people with visual problems. In 1999 the RNIB (Royal National Institute for the Blind) launched its campaign for good web design, encouraging sites to be created for those with poor vision in mind – that is, with more emphasis placed on text than graphics.

Not only could a poorly designed site be in contravention of the Disability

Case study three | one plus one equals lots

If you like the idea of having total control over your site then 1&1 Internet (www.oneandone.co.uk) could be just what you're looking for. Log on to its website and you can't fail to be impressed by the quality of its service, size of its infrastructure and reasonable pricing. The company will host your business site for just £8.99 plus VAT per month – this even includes the cost of registering a domain name. There is no minimum contract period and you get a good selection of bundled software to help you build your site. Alternatively, and at no extra cost, you can use 1&1's unique online WebsiteCreator to quickly build your site. You really don't need any design skills or programming knowledge.

There is a catalogue of fully customisable design layouts with colour text options – you can even use your own photographic images. Indeed, 1&1 Internet claims that the extensive templates and colours give you a range of over 100,000 design possibilities. By following the simple instructions you could opt for a short Flash introduction running on your home page – all without knowing anything about web-design software. Just one down side: small business users are limited to a maximum of 25 pages with WebsiteCreator.

The hosting fee includes a massive 300MB of web space, 200 email addresses using your domain name and full control of collecting and autoreplying to emails.

Sydney Organising Committee of the Olympic Games was fined $20,000 for having a site that was, in parts, inaccessible to the visually impaired. For more information on accessibility, see www.rnib.org.uk/digital.

www.icra.org. Internet filtering systems use Icra ratings to either block or permit sites, especially with children in mind. Assuming your site does not carry any objectionable material, registering with Icra will ensure that as many people as possible see your site.

Search engines will automatically stop listing your site if any offensive words are detected. You should consider registering your site with Icra

Ask the right questions…

After reading this feature you may have decided that you lack both the time and expertise to set up your own website. However, at least now you can talk to a web design company from a position of some knowledge, asking the right questions about domain names, hosting, keywords, descriptions, accessibility, graphics, e-commerce and search engines.

And make sure you get everything in writing so that there are no unexpected bills at a later date. How much you should pay is very subjective. And where do you find a web designer? Ask other businesses in your area for recommendations, use a search engine to find one locally or look on www.ukwda.org, the UK Association of Web Designers, which helpfully lists members by county. ■

Discrimination Act, but your business would also be turning its back on a significant sector of the public.

The RNIB issues a See It Right award to companies whose sites offer full accessibility. The first UK recipient was supermarket Tesco, which maintains a parallel site (www.tesco.com/access) for visually impaired customers. At the other end of the scale, in November 00 the

Bear in mind that the information you put on your website must adhere to all the laws and regulations that cover any form of publishing and not cause any offence on obscene, racial, religious or any other grounds. Search engines will automatically stop listing your site if any offensive words are detected. You should consider registering your site with Icra (Internet Content Rating Association) at