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At one time, an accounting firm's website could get away with being little more than an online business card: static by today's standards and largely uninformative. Then,

sites evolved into online brochures with a homepage/cover that offered links inside

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This is all about the kind of person who shops at Home Depot for drywall tape or the kind of person who shops the same store for batteries ... and has no idea what drywall tape is. After many years of working with the accounting profession, I've found that most firms want a website (or any kind of technology) presented to them in a wrapped box with a fancy bow.

The typical accountant doesn't want to spend time or resources developing and maintaining a website. It's far more beneficial for them to focus on what they do best.

Clearly, offering site-building help to accounting firms is hot, and providers are offering more features than ever ... not to mention that fees range from a few dollars a month to hundreds for additional storage or even thousands for a specialized service.

The bottom line? Firms are happy to pay these fees for dynamic sites with reliable hosting.

Features & More Features

What features are popular? Today's firm wants a website that is far and beyond the electronic brochure. Here's what today's site builders are offering:

- Client portal integration and high page counts.
- Growing numbers of templates for page layout.
- Simplified construction, including text editors and the ability to change layouts without tech assistance or fees.
- Help with content, including news and sometimes thousands of articles that aren't, admittedly, usually exclusive to a given firm's use.
- Newsletters.
- Initial free trials.
- Email.

- Firm-owned domain names and free transfer of content and data if the firm elects

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Providers know they can offer firms a lot more than secure hosting, which, in itself, is growing more sophisticated with better anti-spam protection, more frequent backup and tougher servers to hack. Several vendors this year reported that customizing firm sites is a major selling point, as is offering copywriting and design services. These services are often offered for an additional charge, but are sometimes included as part of the standard site-building package. Many providers are also offering the capability to pre-schedule emails in addition to adding email marketing services.

E-Commerce is becoming more alluring for firms, and providers have responded with support and integration for many e-commerce and payment platforms, including PayPal, Amazon, etc. And, of course, some vendors are offering blogs or integration with blogging platforms.

Cutting-Edge Stuff

Many vendors now offer search engine optimization (SEO), which helps firms write and build their sites to rate high in searches. Providers now have tracking and reporting tools that record when a search of a firm's site took place, who searched using what keywords, what country the searcher was from, etc.

Social marketing links to Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube and other applications are also finding their way into these tools. And of course, some vendors are realizing the strong need to provide integration with client portals.

Get Away From Templates

The time has rarely been better for an accounting firm to look for a provider to help build a website. Let's face the truth: Accountants just aren't going to try and do it themselves and probably don't want to.

While templates are necessary and can help firms get online quickly, many of the

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