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You never get a second chance to make a first impression. Think about that when you undertake the task of designing a new or improved web site strategy for your firm. Your web site will continually evolve as your virtual office of the future, serving as a gateway to new clients, a service center for existing clients, a recruiting tool for new employees and more. It is highly likely that you will have more client interaction via your web site rather than through client visits to your office.

There are some distinct advantages to conducting business through your virtual office (web site). Clients can come and visit anytime, from wherever they are. They don't need an appointment, and they can pick up and drop off documents and files (electronically). With the current evolution of web conferencing tools, they can even have face-to-face meetings with you via your web site. One thing you can be sure of is that your clients will want the option to be able to conduct more and more types of business with your firm via your web site. Therefore, you are well advised not to take your web site and its design lightly, anymore than you would casually design, build and furnish your bricks-and-mortar office. Therefore, in this magazine's endless pursuit to help you improve the quality of your practice, we present this review of web site building tools and service providers focused on the accountant community.

Continuing with our analogy between your bricks-and-mortar office and your virtual office, let's consider the alternative methods available to design

and build your office. At one end of the spectrum, you may want to establish

and floor coverings, etc. The same spectrum of options applies to web site design and construction. At one end, you can utilize a pre-fabricated web site design with minimal customization that is relatively inexpensive and easy to maintain. At the other end of the spectrum, you can hire a web site development firm to design and build a completely customized web site to your exact specifications. Each approach has its pros and cons.

The purpose of this review is to focus on the "pre-fabricated" approach. We are featuring web site builder tools that streamline the site development process at a fraction of the time, cost and complexity of a completely built-to-order site. The good news is that the tools we have reviewed are increasingly offering a greater array of functionality and features that give you the best of both worlds.

This review of web site builders courting the accountant community is focused on the following evaluation criteria:

Design Theme — This refers to the capability to design a site that is easy-to-navigate, visually pleasing and flexible enough to allow you to convey the desired image of your firm's virtual office. This criterion covers items such as templates, color schemes, navigation tools, etc.

Content — This refers to the breadth and depth of pre-fabricated content that you can customize or brand for your firm, allowing you to have a site worth visiting without the burden of having to constantly develop content from scratch. Examples include electronic newsletters, tax and accounting bulletins, news releases, etc. Typical tax and financial calculators are included within this section, as well.

Site Maintenance — This refers to the "under

applications,
etc.

Site Marketing — Building your web site is step one,
but helping potential clients find it (and your firm) is the goal. Many web
site development companies provide assistance with marketing the web sites,
from making it easier for search engines to find your site to inclusion in local
directories. Another common option is paid placement of a listing. This section
also notes how the domain name is managed — is it www.bobsaccounting.com?
Or is it www.bobsaccounting.vendor_name.com? A firm really needs its own domain
name.

Vendor Service & Support — This section focuses
on the vendor's overall ability to help you design, build and market your
site. This includes consultation on how to use specific features and functions
and getting your web site registered with the search engine services. Some of
the metrics used to assess this aspect include years of service and the subscriber
base.

Pricing/Value — This section covers the cost of the
service relative to the breadth and depth of features and functions provided.
Generally speaking, this typically includes a setup fee, a recurring fee (monthly
or annual) and then a la carte fees for specialized applications, functionality
or services.

While this review is intended to help you research and select web site builders
that are compatible with your firm's objectives, the best way to evaluate
a particular application is to get the names of some of the vendor's customers,
view those customers' web sites, and contact them directly to get their
candid assessment of the vendor's services as well as the behind-the-scenes

functionality provided. Before jumping into the vendor reviews on the following

foundation
of online client services and collaboration.
Read Full
Review

CCH Tax & Accounting —
ProSystem *fx* Site Builder

CCH Tax and Accounting's ProSystem *fx*
Site Builder initially entered the market in 1997 as Execusite. It was
subsequently acquired by CCH in December 2001 and rebranded under its
current name a few months later.
Read Full
Review

CPASiteSolutions — CompleteWebSuite

CPASiteSolutions was introduced in 1999 and is
currently on version 12 of its CompleteWebSuite. Enhancements are made
on a monthly basis with the most recent enhancements at the time of this
review including new editable monthly e-mailed newsletters and new e-mail
marketing system improvements.
Read Full
Review

Drake Software — 1040.com
Preparer Websites

Drake Software provides its 1040.com Preparer Websites
to users of it tax preparation software. The web site building service
was introduced in 2000 and is currently on version 3. The previous version

added full modification of layout, look, feel, color scheme, ease of use

attractions and events. The company's CPA Sites.com service was introduced in 1997.

[Read Full Review](#)

E. Mochila — Websites for Accounting Professionals

E. Mochila, Inc. offers its web site building services under the name of Websites for Accounting Professionals. The service was introduced in February 2004, and is currently in its fourth version.

[Read Full Review](#)

Gear Up Tax Seminars — Accountant-City & Tax Beacon

Accountant-City originated in 1999, providing basic business card-style web sites to accounting professionals. The newest version of the service, version 3.0, was released in 2003, with much more content and customization capability.

[Read Full Review](#)

Tax-Aid, Inc. — Accounting And Financial Site Builder (AFSB)

Tax-Aid, Inc. offers a low-cost web site building service called Accounting and Financial Site Builder (AFSB). The service was introduced in August 2000 and has offered ongoing enhancements on a regular basis, such as an image uploader, integrated client e-mailing,

user-optional HTML programming, e-mail forwarding, a setup wizard and

Thomson Creative Solutions — Web Builder CS

Creative Solutions's Web Builder CS (formerly Web Builder Solution) has been on the market since 2000. The company has enhanced the product over the past several years to include a comprehensive library of templates with text and graphics to simplify building a firm web site.

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Accountant Website Builders 2005 — Executive Summary

The main point to take away from this review is that you should be thoughtful in the design and development of your web site. It will likely become the primary place where you conduct business.

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