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Isaac M. O'Bannon • Feb. 26, 2019

It is the nature of my work that I spend virtually all of the business day online, and usually a few more hours when I'm not at work. So it's probably not surprising that while researching the latest accounting and business technologies, taking note of tax law changes, and collaborating with tax and accounting professionals, I see a lot of websites for accounting and tax practices.

One of the most amazing things, however, is that according to our 2010 Reader Survey about 50 percent of small practices claim not to have a website at all. There are different reasons, of course, but quite often these smaller practitioners just don't see the direct ROI or benefit from a website, especially if they are the person who has to maintain it. If you're in the 50 percent group who currently does not have a website, I'm probably not going to get you to convert. But you should at least keep this in mind: When you're in your office or at home and you want to look up the telephone number for a business, do you go first to a phonebook or first to your computer? If your answer is the computer, you should have just convinced yourself of the need for at least a basic website.

You probably won't find strict definitions of basic and advanced websites, but I categorize them based on the amount of content/pages on the site as well as how often it is updated and whether it offers tools and resources that might cause a website visitor to return.

At the most basic level, a website should offer a little about the professional practice, such as services offered, a short bio on key staff and contact information. This is pretty basic stuff and can be done at a cost of less than \$100 per year. Many vendors of professional tax and accounting products offer "website builder" tools either free or inexpensively to their customers, and there are also several accountant-focused and general business website development systems out there that are inexpensive

and easy to use. Some are all-inclusive of the name and the hosting, which are the

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but they are better than nothing. These domains are usually free and are worth what you pay for them.

Web Hosting: Where the domain name is similar to creating an entity, it doesn't really do anything other than buy a name. The next step is to get hosting, which is essentially renting space on an Internet server. You'll find a lot of web hosts out there, too, including most registration companies. You can buy from one and host on another, but for most small businesses it's easier to keep them together. Web hosting costs also vary on how far in advance you want to prepay, as well as the expected traffic volume to the website. For most accounting practices, a general small business hosting package will cost around \$10 to \$40 per month, but can sometimes be found a little lower with prepayment of a year or two. Hosting packages also usually include several email addresses for your domain name, such as yourname@youraccountingfirm.com, info@youraccountingfirm.com or other options.

For those professionals who don't want to bother with either of these aspects, the combined domain/hosting template-based packages make the processes pretty simple. And once you've gotten these two items in place or are using an all-in-one system, you are ready to actually put your website content online.

Everything I've discussed prior to this point has been related to just getting a website up and running, at least at the basic level. But when it comes to the effectiveness of a website, content is king.

For tips on what makes a basic website a great one, you can read the rest of this column on our website at www.CPATechAdvisor.com/go/XXXX, where I point out some easy-to-use and cost-effective ways to keep your website fresh, interesting and useful to your clients and potential clients. You can also read about several website

builders at www.CPATechAdvisor.com/go/XXXX. You may also want to check out a

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June 2010 print edition, then you probably agree since I was able to draw you to our website to read the second half. You came because you were interested in the subject — making your website's content easier to manage while keeping it fresh and more useful to current and potential clients.

I see a lot of great professional websites and some not-so-good ones (and even a few that fall below that level). What really sets professional websites apart from others is having more than just the basics, but also having more detailed information about specific firm specialties and industries that you serve. Take a look at this website for an example of great content and branding: www.daviscpasolutions.com.

Also useful are links to news about your practice or your firm's point of view on how particular new legislation might affect small businesses. For many practices, a blog is great tool for this, as it allows you or another professional in your firm to jot down a few notes on what you think of a new tax law or how it might affect your clients. Then, you can provide a link to the online source where you learned about it and also recommend that they contact you if they have questions about how it might affect them. Through a blog and/or a firm newsletter, professionals can reinforce their client relationships by positioning themselves as experts and also urging action on the part of the client, potentially resulting in new client services. Authoring articles is another way to position members of your firm as experts, and you can read more about this process at www.CPATechAdvisor.com/go/XXXX.

The most valuable content, however, is often information that probably isn't all that practical for accountants to produce themselves, because it requires expertise and time. Such tools include periodic guides for financial and business planning, tax strategies, tax guides, and detailed overviews on tax laws written for individuals and small businesses. Fortunately, firms can add these sections to their websites in a syndicated fashion, by subscribing to content packages from companies like

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might include the latest “cash for appliances” program, which people think of as similar to “cash for clunkers,” but is really quite different in every state. Do you really want to spend a couple of hours to find out that a client might save \$100 on a new refrigerator? Probably not. But with information about this energy efficiency rebate program and many other individual and business tax credits and benefits programs automatically updated on your site, your firm can provide valuable information to current and potential clients with no effort.

The frequently updated content also has the benefit of helping your website move up higher on search engine results. And fresh blog content can raise results even higher and produce more pages from your website in the search results.

Websites don't have to be overly complex or take too much of your time, but they are a necessary component of any professional practice. Even at the basic level, a website can help clients find you and your services, while advanced features and content can keep them coming back and reinforce relationships.

If you've tried to maintain a firm website in the past but found it either too cumbersome or you didn't think the end result was professional enough, the good news is that professional sites are easier than ever and about as inexpensive as ever to buy and build. And the do-it-yourself development tools are as easy to use as Word. So no more excuses. Get your website up and running.

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