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Column: Tricks & Tips

Jun. 02, 2010

*From the June 2010 Issue*

[If you've already read the part of this column that appeared in our June print issue, you can [click here to jump](#) to the bonus online content.]

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 Readers' 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

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### **A Domain Name:**

www.youraccountingfirm.com is an example of a primary domain address. This is bought/registered on an annual basis through domain “registrars” like Network Solutions, GoDaddy, WestHost and others, and can be prepaid for

multiple years, with prices starting around \$20 if paying for only one year at a time. As an alternative, some website building systems will give you a web address that adds onto another address, such as

www.techvendor.com/youraccountingfirm.

These are not nearly as memorable, professional or effective for marketing your firm, 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 may be 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@your

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to the effectiveness of a website, content is king.

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](http://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/2746](http://www.CPATechAdvisor.com/go/2746).

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 BizActions.com, which produce such materials specifically

for the websites of professional accounting firms. In addition to these resources,

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This 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.

You can also read about several website builders at [www.CPATechAdvisor.com/go/2639](http://www.CPATechAdvisor.com/go/2639).

You may also want to check out a recent webcast, “Build Your Website Today ... Increase Presence, Productivity and Profits,” at [www.CPATechAdvisor.com/CCHeducation](http://www.CPATechAdvisor.com/CCHeducation).

**(Bonus Online Content Starts Here!)**

As I was saying, content is king. And if you read the first half of this column

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serve. 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 for this last aspect, allowing you or another professional to just jot a few notes on what you think of a new tax law or how it might affect your clients. Then 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 such as this, 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.

The most valuable content, however, is often information that just isn't all that practical for accountants to produce themselves, because of expertise and the time involved. These 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 kind of a syndicated fashion, by subscribing to content packages from companies like BizActions.com that produce these materials specifically

for the websites of professional accounting firms. In addition to these resources, the content providers also offer additional business content, e-mail-based marketing tools, automated newsletters and financial calculators that let your website's visitors quickly estimate taxes, paycheck changes, college savings, retirement, estate planning, amortizations and other data. And by performing these tasks on your firm's website, when they decide to take action, they are much more likely to seek your professional guidance.

With a subscription to a content provider, your website can be automatically

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At the end of each year, we take a look at the various website building tools for accounting practices that are on the market, such as those mentioned at the start of this article. (Click here for the 2009 look at website building tools. [www.cpatechadvisor.comgo/2639](http://www.cpatechadvisor.comgo/2639))

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 will help reinforce client 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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