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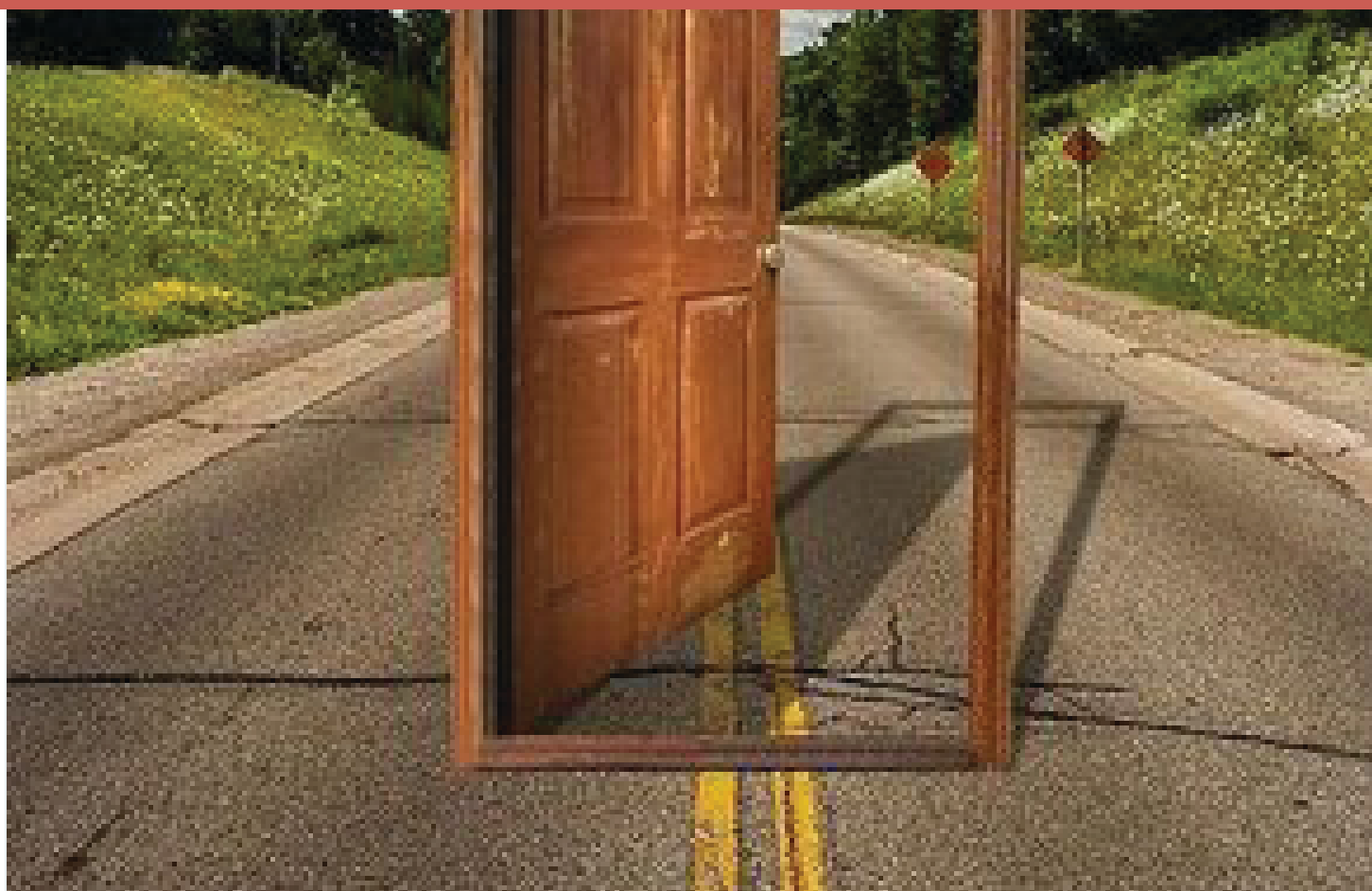
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Randy Johnston • Aug. 31, 2011

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Most of us have built our businesses based on relationships. Some have built a reputation around a specific expertise. Others have built a business based on service levels. All of these strategies are still extremely important, but an increasingly important factor in the last 15 years is being found on the web. Many of us are not trying to build a national business, but as new, younger clients look for services, they are often turning online. Potential clients with more specific needs are also using Internet search to find new sources of expertise. What does your business home look like? Is your front door and waiting room inviting? Do you physically visit many businesses today? How many of your supplier's businesses have you been in? When was the last time you turned to a phone book to find business services?

There are clear factors that make certain web presences stand out more than others:

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Would you be pleased and honored to have unknown guests visit your site? Does it represent the quality and values of your firm? Is your site understandable? To test this, ask your family members, friends or non-employee associates to evaluate your site with you. Although this is clearly an amateur approach, it will give you an immediate sense about the issues with your site. Consider your goals for the firm's website. Are these clearly communicated and accomplished? What do you want the website to do for your firm? If your current website is accomplishing everything you want it to, well, excellent for you! If not, you are now ready for a conversation with a website professional.

You can acquire or build websites multiple ways, but there are three methods that dominate. The first is to obtain a site from a provider that has canned content and templates, usually for a small upfront fee and a relatively low recurring monthly expense. Most tax & accounting firms take this approach since it carries the least expense. Examples of this approach include CCH ProSystem *fx* Site Builder, Thomson Reuters Web Builder CS, Build Your Firm, Emochila, CPASiteSolutions, CPASites, etc. (see page XX for more information on these tools).

The second method involves greater risk and expense. This is where expertise is sought out, sometimes locally and sometimes from a national or international resource. These sites are often built based on a local referral, and the thinking is that you can customize the site to meet your needs and to give your firm a unique look and feel. The issue with this method is that when the website programming resource becomes disinterested or unavailable, you may have to rebuild your entire site. Sometimes the programmers of custom sites can commit to other projects and become unavailable for maintenance or updates.

The third method involves a hybrid of the two other approaches, where professional design and marketing is used on a site and content updated inside these wireframes

or designs. Sites built with this technique are cleaner with clearer messaging than

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2) Use a content management system, such as Joomla.

3) Make a significant part of your website visible “above the fold” (not requiring visitors to scroll down).

4) Include social media integration using YouTube video feeds, RSS feeds, Twitter, Facebook, etc.

5) Make your website usable on mobile devices.

6) Build your website so it follows search engine optimization (SEO) rules. These rules change over time.

RHONDA – this list could be boxed out

Search engines view the following:

1) domain name

2) page title (with 14 words in the title currently best)

3) headlines

4) first paragraph content

5) hidden site description (should contain between 25 and 100 words)

6) remaining visible content

7) links between other sites

8) hidden keywords

Your content management system may help with some of these items, but your

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keywords into the code portion of the website. Then, the keywords need to be used in the text on each page of the site.

This is where SEO starts ... not ends, as many people think. The goal is that you appear on the first page of the major search engines when using the search terms that potential clients use to find you. It's not an exact science because the engines don't divulge why they rank things the way they do. Through a community that thrives on testing theories, there have been tried-and-true methods that are known to increase rankings. Often times, these discoveries lead to spammers exploiting it, and then the engines respond by adjusting their algorithm. A focus on the end user experience (providing fresh, relevant content in a quick and easy manner) will lead to the best long-term results, not "chasing the algorithm." See page XX for some basic SEO tips.

Since the majority of all web visits start at a search engine, it is important to ensure that a search strategy is included in the overall website design process. Simple design or programming decisions can have a significant impact on rankings and can remove from search engines entirely. The trick is to understand how people look for you to select the right terms to optimize. SEO can make a huge difference in your results, but it is not cheap. Typical SEO services vary in cost from \$500 to \$1,000 per month or more. Good SEO is expensive, but it does deliver a very good ROI if done right with a good website. However, if you add just one client that pays fees of \$10,000 or more per year or for a single project, this marketing expense has more than paid for itself.

Consider your web presence. If you have a marginal website, outsiders will perceive that your services are marginal, too. If you do the right work with the right professionals, you will have an image that is professional, conveys your key messages, works on multiple browsers and platforms, and allows you to be found easily in your local market. So how much is one client worth?

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