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From the Dec. 2013 issue.

Many firms are effectively using digital marketing to tap into lucrative niche markets and services worldwide, and are leveraging their industry experience to provide better client service. While firms historically grew by serving a wide range of local clients, many firms are now focusing on providing expert services to a much more

narrow range of vertical industries over a larger geographic area. Although this

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considered credible. The quality of the content on the website is used by prospects and clients to evaluate the knowledge and competence of the firm, and is important to a good first (and subsequent) impressions.

We reviewed six tools for building a firm's web presence for 2013. Those services are:

- AccountantsWorld Website Relief
- Build Your Firm Website and Internet Marketing
- CCH Prosystem *fx* Site Builder
- CPA Site Solutions
- GetNetSet Websites for Accounting Firms
- Tenenz AFSB Accounting and Financial Site Builder
- Thomson Reuters Web Builder CS

Some of the features which should be considered include:

- Is the application hosted in a commercial data center with backups, redundant power and internet connections? Are the servers monitored and secured 24x7x365?
- Are staff e-mail accounts and secure client portal solutions included with the website?
- How tightly does the website integrate with the firm's client portals, content subscriptions, and appointment calendars? Does the website serve as a dynamic digital reception area for clients and prospects alike, or is it simply the web version of an out-of-date paper brochure held over from the last century?
- Is the website creation tool easy to use for novices and yet flexible enough for those with advanced requirements?
- How many site templates are available, and do they present the image which the firm would like to portray to clients and prospects?

- Does the service offer custom template development, and if so, what are the short

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- ~~Content and content marketing tools for home businesses and practice areas available~~ from the provider or an industry partner?
- What, if any, integration is available between the firm's website, blogging tools, and social media presences?

Significant efforts are required from both practitioners and their marketing consultants to create an effective website using any tool. These marketing efforts can be hindered with solutions which are inflexible, difficult to use, or include stale template designs. Websites have evolved significantly since the 20th century, and if you are using an old tool like Microsoft FrontPage, it's time to move on to a modern toolset with stronger features and better security.

A firm's website is one of the least expensive ways to make a good impression on clients and prospects. Just as one would not wear a tank top and cutoffs to a new client meeting, a poorly designed website with weak content does not put forth an image of competence, stability, and attention to detail. Your website should be like your wardrobe – it should have seasonal, professional content which is appropriate for your audience.

Firms must find tools which meet their needs and helps them communicate their personal sense of style and professional philosophy to a wider audience so they can attract the right clients. A well-designed site can which help the firm and its partners achieve their goals. Selecting, updating, and maintaining your website is a significant part of your firm's image to the public. Those who ignore or neglect this critical communication tool make it much harder for clients and prospects to work with the firm.

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