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FIRM MANAGEMENT

How Important is Your Firm's Website?

Randy Johnston • Dec. 17, 2013



It has been a while since this column has covered the importance of your web site and the use of web technologies. Let me be as clear as I can: you must have a clear web strategy, an elegant web site that runs in browsers, smartphones and tablets, has clear branding for your firm, integrates social media, and all around is an easy place to do business with your firm. Those needs are pretty easy to say. You may have a few more items to add or some things to remove. But the real trick is how to get a really great web site built and maintained.

Your Web Site is Your Office Front Door

I don't know who said this first or who to attribute this analogy to, but in today's market, it is true. How many of you use a phone book to look up a phone number? Most of you have critical numbers stored in your smartphone or use a web search to find a phone number. How many of you look on the web for information about a potential client or competitor? You probably do this almost every day. If you have a question, don't you frequently "see what Google says?" And, if your search habits are like mine, when you go looking, you only look at the first few pages of web search results or you specifically visit a known good site as your source of information. You check a few web sites to see if they are legitimate if you are looking for something, or you wind up directly on the firm's web site that has the information you want.

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 CPA firm look like on the web? Does your site look professional and offer broad functionality and client collaboration? Is it still in the 90's acting only as a yellow page listing? Is your web front door and first impression inviting and responsive? Think about this. How often do you visit a firm's web site before you go to see them? 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?

Most of us have built our firms based on relationships. Some have built a reputation around a specific expertise. Others have grown the firm based on service levels. All of these strategies are still extremely important, but a new factor in the last 15 years is being found on the web. Many of us are not trying to build a national accounting firm, but simply want a dominant local presence. We want to be found in our own market when businesses are looking for accounting services. Being found in your local market is a technique known as local search engine optimization (SEO). If you search on accountant or CPA in your home town, and you don't find your firm or

yourself on the first page, or better yet in the first two to three results, you have some work to do.

There are clear factors that make certain web sites stand out more than others: design, readability, ease of navigation, loading speed & performance, ability to be found by search engines, localization including local search, and the ability to run in different browsers on different devices. Your website should support your firm's business model, and that may well include portal capability, integration of online accounting, news feeds and content that you produce yourself through social media. If you have a relatively static "yellow page" website that merely lists team members and services, you are highly unlikely to attract new business to the firm. That approach is "so" last decade.

Before explaining the options available, consider your website as it stands today. 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, AccountantsWorld Website Relief, Build Your Firm, CPA Site Solutions, CPAsites, etc. You can find comparative information at www.websites4accountants.com.

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. You maintain or provide the updated content. Sites built with this technique are cleaner with clearer messaging than the template sites using canned content. Examples of these types of sites include the work being done by the RootWorks Web Development team or BOP Design.

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