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E-TOOLS

5 Tips for Building a Professional Web Presence ... and Why You Should Do it Now

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5 tips

All of us seem to be exceptionally busy this summer — attending classes, conferences and online sessions in the ongoing pursuit of complying with CPE requirements. Personally, I enjoy each and every event because it offers the opportunity to meet with practitioners and stay apprised of concerns, trends and triumphs.

In my travels, one key statistic that I've heard is that just over 50% of today's firms have a website. As I talk to firm leaders about their web presence, I ask them if they are proud of their online brand and how they are using their site. Most tell me that they do little to nothing with their website. Most also tell me that they were simply tired of being told that a website was a necessity. So they built one ... and there it sits with no real strategy for marketing or branding.

While I think it's great that more and more firms are developing a website, it does little good if there is no strategy in place. What accounting professionals need to understand is that their website is the new *front door* to their firm. It is where people go to learn about you, your staff, your services and your history. If your website is friendly, easy to navigate and professional, then people will want to "come in" and further discuss their accounting needs. Just ask yourself a few simple questions:

- Do you keep a big thick phone book in your top desk drawer anymore?
- Where do you look up a business number if it's not in your cell phone?
- How often do you check out a vendor's website before you purchase a product or service?
- Would you use a bank or financial management group that did not offer online services — allowing you to review accounts, statements, and other docs and data whenever needed?

I'd venture to say that most of your answers lean toward using the web. The fact is that old-school marketing tools like the Yellow Pages no longer reign supreme. Google is the first place prospects go to find just about any product or service ... and that includes an accounting firm. The time has come to start thinking differently about your website and the importance it plays in firm strategy, marketing and business operations.

Realizing the power of the web, I want you to now ask yourself if you are comfortable and proud of your web presence. If your website is your new front door, what impression are you giving visitors? Will they want to proceed inside or run away? The fact is, if you are not 100% confident that they will want to come inside, then it's time to do something about it. For some of you, that means a complete site overhaul. And for others maybe it's a few tweaks here and there. The end result should be a place that feels good for prospects and existing clients.

It is also important to mention that your site not only needs to look professional and aesthetically appealing, but it should also support online services. Don't fool yourself. The majority of clients and prospects have come to expect advanced web-based services, like secure portals for document review and exchange. ***If it's not online, it's not with the time!*** Again I ask you, would you use a bank that did not offer online services? Give the people what they want — convenient, helpful and efficient online access. This should be part of your web strategy as much as format and design.

This is a lot to take in, so here are a few tips that will help you develop a web presence for today's prospects and clients.

- **Develop a website that reflects the personality of your firm.** Be sure to incorporate firm colors, a professional logo, partner and staff photos (this is a great personal touch), welcome videos, etc. Show visitors who you are from your home page.
- **Keep your site clean.** Create a site that is simple and easy to navigate. Don't go crazy with menu items. Straightforward and simple is best.
- **Write your story in clear, concise prose.** In other words, don't bog your site down with volumes of text. Tell your story succinctly. Visitors will never read a long page of text. You have to get their attention right away, so tell an engaging, but short story.
- **Offer advanced online services,** where clients have 24/7 access to their financial information (e.g., personalized and secure client portals, online payroll, etc.). Online services bring clients back to your site over and over again...and that is what you want.
- **Don't be boring.** In other words, don't be like everyone else. Write a unique tale and create a custom presence.

It's already mid-summer, so if you don't feel that your web presence is where it should be, it's time to do something about it. Before you know it, year-end will be upon us ... so get busy creating a web development plan now to make sure your new front door is up to snuff before the start of the new year. If you want to see what my team and I have done to enhance my firm's web presence, feel free to review my site at root.com.

Possible PQ

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