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By Michael Roselius, CPA

Those of us in the northern hemisphere are noticing some gradual changes in the sunrise and sunset times ... and in where the shadows are beginning to shift. If you are not enjoying the changing of seasons, maybe you need to get out of your office more!

But before you head out the door ... or maybe after you get back from enjoying some time outside ... take a few minutes to evaluate your to-do list. You know, that list of prioritized items where certain entries may have been neglected or pushed to the bottom, not because they don't need to be done but because the Important/Urgent items seem to land in your inbox daily, slowly easing other tasks down the list. Busy season is just around the corner and will start making its way to your doorstep at lightning speed once the holidays start. You want to make sure you invest some time now in those items that may have fallen into your Important/Not Urgent list. And one of the items that should be somewhere in that list is: "Update our website!"

Most likely, you've had some staff changes (adds, deletes, promotions), and maybe you've changed the focus of your practice. Don't hide your light under a bushel basket, as the old saying goes; let the world know who you are, what you do, and why you are the best at it. This special feature highlights a number of offerings that specialize in helping tax and accounting professionals build and maintain a website. As noted throughout this issue, building your brand is essential to the success of your firm, and one of the first places your clients and potential clients will look is online. There is no better time to start building or re-evaluating your firm's online presence, and these tools can help. And we looked at several factors that you'll want to consider as you determine the route to take for building or updating your website.

Website Design & System Tools

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providers will handle all changes themselves, which may be the best option for those who don't have experienced or dedicated staff for website design and maintenance. This level of service means you can communicate your updates and get back to what you do best.

Technology Features

With a few exceptions, the design and hosting providers covered here allow or require a unique domain name for your firm's website, and can handle all the technical details of registering new domains or moving your site to their hosting service. You'll also want to think about email options and support, particularly if your firm maintains its own email Exchange server and wants to continue down that path. For state-of-the-art web features, you may want to use Flash animations, so check to see if this is supported.

Content

Websites for tax and accounting firms should have several goals. You want to make it easy for prospective clients to contact you. You want to define your image and brand, and invite inquiries for new engagements. You want to encourage visitors to come back for more and even bookmark your site because of the valuable resources you provide, such as financial calculators, guides, reference material, tracking tools, etc. Some firms will also want to provide online collaboration with current clients through portals, allowing for secure transfer and exchange of documents.

Website Marketing

Your website will begin to appear in search engine results not long after going online, and you'll want to know where your pages rank. One approach is to pay the search engines for preferential listing. But you'll definitely want to use tools for search engine optimization (SEO), which will help you manage where your pages rank.

Using these tools to effectively tag your pages will help ensure you move up the

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will be easy for your clients to navigate. If your website does not yet have client portals for secure file transfer, you'll want to get this set up and tested long before busy season, and you'll want to get your clients comfortable with the process now. Many of them probably already use online portals for online banking, reservations, etc.

The bottom line with developing and establishing your online presence is to make sure your website is up to date, interesting, useful and ranked high in the search engines. The website building tools featured here are a great place to start your search. They can help you get a professional website up and running and updated quickly without compromising on quality. After all, your firm's branding and marketing often starts with your website.

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