

Standing **out** in cyber space:

how does your website compare with the competition?



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Most business owners realise that having a website is just as important these days as a telephone number or Yellow Pages listing.

Some experts go so far as to say if your business isn't online, you won't be in business for long.

With more and more consumers turning to the Internet as a tool for price comparisons, product research and embracing the convenience of home-based shopping, it's not only essential to have a website, but to have one that works well, or at least one that matches your competitors' sites for usability and presentation.

If you don't have a website, it's time to seriously consider getting one. It doesn't have to be state-of-the-art or expensive, but it does have to be user-friendly, easy to find and relevant to your target market.

If you're not online you're at a competitive disadvantage. It's that simple. Why? Because the web provides a dynamic sales environment in which it's cheap and easy for consumers to find alternative suppliers and to quickly and effectively compare the cost and range of products and services on offer. If you don't have a website, you're not even in the race.

If you do have a website, it's important to ensure that it presents your business in a professional manner and outshines or at least equals the efforts of your

competitors. Poorly designed sites can be more detrimental to business than having no site at all; they send a clear message to potential customers that you're behind the times and uncommitted to quality.

So how do you judge whether your site is up to scratch or in need of urgent overhaul? The answer is simple: conduct a comparative analysis of your competitors' websites, which is really just a fancy way of saying visit their sites to see if they look and function better than yours.

What to analyse

Most businesses are aware of who their competitors are, at least at a local level, but when compiling your list of sites to visit, be sure to include interstate and international counterparts. While you may not actively compete with a shoe store in Massachusetts, if you're in the business of selling shoes, it can't hurt to see how other shoe stores present their products online. You may even pick up a good idea or two.

The reality is that once you're online, you've entered the global market. You may not wish to service interstate and

international clients, but they'll still be able to access your website and your competitors' sites. So to use the example above, if the Massachusetts shoe store offers online purchasing and international shipping, they are in fact a competitor of yours. There's nothing stopping your customers from purchasing from them, so it pays to monitor how your product or service is being presented online at a local, national and international level.

Search engines and directories like Google and Yahoo provide the simplest way to locate competitors, although you might also wish to check relevant industry-specific or regional directories as well. The main problem with search engines may not be finding enough competitors, but finding too many.

If you're overwhelmed with competitors in your search results, try using the "advanced search" option available in Google or expanding the list of keywords in your enquiry or searching for specific phrases by using quotation marks.

When conducting your search, list words and phrases that describe your product or service from a customer's perspective.

Once you've got your list of competitors' sites it's time to think objectively, or more correctly, to think like the customer, and pay them a visit. The following is a list of elements you might want to compare. Not all will apply to your business, but for those that do, here's what to look for.

Domain Name: is the site name easy to remember, relevant to the business, product or service and easy to spell? As the number of registered websites continues to grow, it's becoming increasingly difficult to get the domain name you want, but it's something worth spending a bit of time considering. If your domain name is a little obscure, try for something simpler or more indicative of what your business does. If the dot.com variant isn't available, try the dot.com.au. Consider using hyphenation – for instance if www.webdesign.com isn't available, www.web-design.com might be.

Home page: what's your first impression of the site? Does it look professional? How informative is the home page? Does it set the proper context for visitors or is it just an annoying splash page with a 30 second

FLASH introduction? Is it quick to load? Does it provide the user with an immediate sense of the business's brand and what it's offering?

Navigation: is the navigation consistent from page to page? Is it easy to find and follow? Are the menu items clear and easy to read? Do the menu titles provide a good idea of what the page contains?

Site organisation: is information grouped according to the way users/customers would look for it? Is the site organisation intuitive and easy to follow? Does it make sense?

Links: are links easy to distinguish from each other or are they ambiguous and uninformative? Are they spread throughout the pages or grouped conveniently in sidebars or a specific section of the site? Most importantly, when clicked, do they take you to the right place?

Search facility and search results: does the site have a search engine? Is it easy to use? Are there basic and advanced search functions? Are the search results organised and easy to understand?

Readability: is the font easy to read? Are line lengths acceptable? Is the site easy to scan, with headlines, generous paragraph spacing and summaries or is it just solid blocks of text?

Graphics and colour schemes: are the images relevant and well proportioned? Do they enhance or overpower the site? Does the site contain an image gallery of relevant products? Are the images original or stock photography? Is the colour scheme in keeping with the brand? Does it impede or improve the site's readability and navigation?

Performance: overall, do pages load slowly or quickly? Are graphics and applications like search and multimedia presentations optimised for easy web viewing? Do you have the option of skipping FLASH presentations? Does the site expand to fit your screen resolution, and if so, does the text and imagery remain in proportion?

Content: is the content adequate? Does the site contain enough information about the business for you to decide whether or not to purchase their products or services? Is the content up to

date and well maintained? Is it relevant to the target audience?

Contact information: does the site provide relevant contact information – ie street address, phone numbers and e-mail addresses? Does it contain an online enquiry form? Does it include facilities for users to request the dispatch of hard copy catalogues and brochures or to sign up for regular e-mail updates?

E-commerce: does the site offer online registration, ordering or purchasing facilities? Does it offer a secure password-protected section for repeat customers? Are customers able to view past purchases and their account history?

Meta Data: how did the site rank in the various searches you conducted via Google and Yahoo? If it ranked well, it pays to check the meta data which you can do in most cases by choosing "view" from your browser menu and clicking "source". Have a look at the keywords and site description they've used and how they've chosen to title each page within the site. The summary or abstract provided under each listing in the search engine results also provides some insight

into the meta data your competitors are using to attract visitors.

If after conducting your comparative analysis you decide your site is way below par, don't despair. At least you know, and you now have a pretty good idea of what you need to change. This will make briefing your web designer a lot easier, or if you're a bit of a DIY champion, you'll have a clear idea of where you need to focus your attention.

If your site is travelling well in comparison to your competitors, enjoy the moment, but keep some perspective. Chances are your competitors are looking to your site for ideas and may well catch-up and even eclipse you in the months and years ahead, so it pays to stay vigilant and check in every now and then to see what they're up to.

Search

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Internet

Image

