

"Do you have a website?"

It's a common question during any business-related conversation. It might come from a prospective client looking for more information about your company, or a customer who wants additional details about your products. Your website can serve as your marketing department, customer service and support or an extension of your sales team in the field. It can serve as both a profit center and a way to reduce the cost of operating your business. But, this is true only if your site is effective and properly maintained.

Too many companies put a site together and forget about it. They assume that just having a site online is enough and that it doesn't need to be maintained. Like any aspect of your business, your website can always be improved and should be reviewed periodically to ensure that it's still achieving its goals and objectives. This article provides a few guidelines for you to consider.

You must be honest when evaluating your site. How does it compare with the sites of your competitors, especially the top players in your market segment? Does it project the image that you try to establish for your organization? Is it professional and accurate? Are you and your employees proud of your site and try to show it off as much as possible? This process can be especially difficult for a site that you designed yourself, or that was done for you – often for free – by a friend, family member or employee that offered to put the site together. Website design and development is a profession, and selecting someone to handle your site should be done with the same care as you would select an accountant, lawyer or another professional to handle an important role in your organization. A poorly-designed site, or one that does not project a professional image, can tarnish the impression that others will have of your company.

Is your website providing value to your organization, your clients or customers? The specific role of your site can vary, and a really effective site can serve several roles. If your company has sales reps in the field, your website should support the presentation that they make to potential clients and provide additional information

that those clients can review after your rep leaves. If you have a customer support and service aspect to your business, the site should offer online support, such as frequently asked questions, downloadable documentation, such as instruction manuals, or the ability to contact your support staff online for immediate support.

If you're selling online, the evaluation process should cover several different areas. Is your online product selection accurate and up-to-date? Are the photos current and clear and are the product descriptions, pricing and other information succinct and correct? Is everything clearly organized and can a first-time visitor to your site find what they are looking for?

It's also important to review the usability of your site. Is the payment process as quick and easy as possible and are your terms and conditions understandable by a typical consumer? Compare how your site functions to both your competitors as well as the leaders in online retail. While you might not be able to invest as much money in your site as a Fortune 500 company, learning how their sites function and interact with their customers can provide insights that you can translate into your own user's experience.

A good manager periodically reviews their employees to ensure that they are meeting their goals and objectives, that they are productive and to address any issues they may be facing. Treating your website as an employee in your organization and putting it through a similar periodic review can help maximize the value of this critical asset and increase its benefit to your customers, your employees and the growth and success of your organization.

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(above) Frank Ferruggia (left), a Partner at McCarter & English, LLC, accepts the award for Medium Company of the Year from the Gateway Chamber Chairman of the Board, Joe Starkey of Schering-Plough Corporation.



Chamber President Jim Coyle (far left) and Chamber Chairman Joe Starkey (far right) present the award for Large Business of the Year to Dr. John Brennan, Senior Vice President of Clinical Services, Saint Barnabas Health Care System and Kate Coyne, Executive Director/Chief Operating Officer of Union Hospital



Rose Bussiculo, President of Epicor, Incorporated and winner of the Small Business of the Year Award, accepts the commemorative flag that was flown over the Capitol Building in her honor from Gateway Chairman Joe Starkey of Schering Plough, Corporation and Jim Coyle, President of the Gateway Chamber.



Pat Scanlon of Union Center National Bank celebrates his win of the Garden State Criminal Mischief Game. His prize was two round-trip first-class tickets to Europe, courtesy of Continental Airlines.