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Why You Need a Website

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By Tim W. Knox

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Q: My business is very small, just me and two employees, and our product really can't be sold online. Do I really need a website?

A: That's a good question. In fact, it's one of the most important and most frequently asked questions of the digital business age. Before I answer, however, let's flash back to the very first time I was asked this question. It was circa 1998, during the toddler years of the internet.

I was giving a speech on the impact of the internet on small business at an association luncheon in Montgomery, Alabama. Back in 1998, which was decades ago in internet years, the future of e-commerce was anybody's guess, but even the most negative futurists agreed that all the signs indicated that a large portion of future business revenues would be derived from online transactions or from offline transactions that were the result of online marketing efforts.

So should your business have a website, even if your business is small and sells products or services you don't think can be sold online? My answer in 1998 is the same as my answer today: Yes, if you have a business, you should have a website. Period. No question. Without a doubt.

Also, don't be so quick to dismiss your product as one that can't be sold online. Nowadays, there's very little that can't be sold over the internet. More than 20 million shoppers are now online, purchasing everything from books to computers to cars to real estate to jet airplanes to natural gas to you name it. If you can imagine it, someone will figure out how to sell it online.

Let me clarify one point: I'm not saying you should put all your efforts into selling your wares over the internet, though if your product lends itself to easy online sales, you should certainly be considering it. The point to be made here is that you should at the very least have a presence on the web so that customers, potential employees, business partners and perhaps even investors can quickly and easily find out more about your business and the products or services you have to offer.

That said, it's not enough that you just have a website. You must have a professional-looking site if you want to be taken seriously. Since many consumers now search for information online prior to making a purchase at a brick-and-mortar store, your site may be the first

chance you have at making a good impression on a potential buyer. If your site looks like it was designed by a barrel of colorblind monkeys, your chance at making a good first impression will be lost.

One of the great things about the internet is that it has leveled the playing field when it comes to competing with the big boys. As mentioned, you have one shot at making a good first impression. With a well-designed site, your little operation can project the image and professionalism of a much larger company. The inverse is also true. I've seen many big company websites that were so badly designed and hard to navigate that they completely lacked professionalism and credibility. Good for you, too bad for them.

You also mention that yours is a small operation, but when it comes to benefiting from a website, size does not matter. I don't care if you're a one-man show or a 10,000-employee corporate giant; if you don't have a website, you're losing business to other companies that do.

Here's the exception to my rule: It's actually better to have no website at all than to have one that makes your business look bad. Your site speaks volumes about your business. It either says, "Hey, look, we take our business so seriously that we have created this wonderful site for our customers!" or it screams, "Hey, look, I let my 10-year-old nephew design my site. Good luck finding anything!"

Your website is an important part of your business. Make sure you treat it as such.

Tim W. Knox is the founder, president and CEO of four successful technology companies: B2Secure Inc., a Web-based hiring management software company; Digital Graphiti Inc., a software development company; and Sidebar Systems, a company that creates cutting edge convergence software for broadcast media outlets; and Online Profits 4U, an e-business dedicated to helping online entrepreneurs start and prosper from an online, wholesale or drop-ship business.