



Free Of Cost Is Not Always Free Of Trouble

If you want to build a free or cheap website, the options are aplenty. But would this route always turn out well for your business?

>> Key Benefits

- Learn why a website is a Must-have for your business and the hazards of not having a webpresence!
- Challenges to building a low-cost/free website
- Options to building a low-cost website and some essentials of a good website



“H aving a website these days is as important as having a visiting card. Does your business need a visiting card?” quizzes Milind Mody, CEO, eBrandz, when asked if *every* business absolutely requires a website today. “If yes, then you most probably need a website,” he

concludes.

Today, when customers need something, they immediately turn to the Web for information. Gone are the days when it was believed that only companies catering to a global customer base needed to have a website. Now, even those businesses that serve a local/hyper-local clientele (like the restaurant at the end of the street) need to have a business website – because people today turn to local search engines instead of the bulky Yellow Pages. This is quite understandable, since the Internet has made it easy for a person to find information on businesses and products to compare features and prices.

Undoubtedly, a website can do good for any business. However, the extent to which a website ‘matters’ varies according to the nature of

the business, its client segment and its product. Pawan Ambardekar, senior manager - Consumer BU (Web 2.0/Consumer Internet, UI Design), GlobalLogic, explains, "A company that has a product being sold in rural India might not get a lot of leverage from a website, which is not the case for a product being sold to the IT savvy population in the metros. If the product or service requires daily updates on the website or requires people to interact, then having a good website is essential. A good example would be media companies, which require content to be updated daily. Also, if you are looking to generate business opportunities by having people come to the website and contact you through the Web, it becomes important that your website provides all the information in a structured manner, similar to what a sales rep would have provided."

In short, a business that fails to have a Web presence fails to reach out to this tech-savvy generation. It fails to be on the ramp where its competitors are doing their well-rehearsed catwalk! What is more, the ability of a website to build credibility and awareness about a business and convert its traffic to 'leads,' determines the effectiveness of an online presence vis-à-vis an entry in the Yellow Pages or in a business journal.

Easier said than done

A website is a must for your business. Unfortunately, building a website in-house is easier said than done! There are several challenges along the way – including the money and talent needed to achieve the desired results. Finding a good website designer or developer is a headache that businesses are often

unwilling to undertake. Mody feels that most Indian designers either work with advertising agencies (where they are paid well), with companies which outsource work from international clients, or work freelance from home. Hence, it becomes very difficult for a firm with limited budgets to get hold of a good Web designer to work for them. It is not easy to find a Web-design company either, because most of them assign a higher priority to their international clients who pay multiple times what their Indian counterparts would.

The first barrier however is neither money nor talent. It is the lack of awareness about the benefits of a website. In some cases, even when businesses do have the money, they hesitate to set it aside for Web development, since they are not confident about its utility. One needs to understand that building a website is like an investment – it serves multiple purposes such as good branding and global visibility. It creates comprehensive awareness and serves as a more cost-effective platform for networking and expanding businesses. Commenting on the reluctance of businesses to set aside funds for Web development, Vivek Bhargava, CEO, Communicate 2, says, "It is the same situation where SMEs say business is good so we don't want to advertise; or business isn't great so we can't advertise (limited funds)!"

Once companies truly realise the benefits of a website, they can definitely find a means within their budget to launch one. At the lowest level, there are several free/low-cost website building applications that one can use, which is as easy as opening a word processor and typing a letter! Like anything that comes free, these come with their

Free website builders

- Googlepages (<http://pages.google.com>)
- Weebly (www.weebly.com)
- Yahoo! Geocities (<http://geocities.yahoo.com>)
- Microsoft Small Business (<http://smallbusiness.officelive.com/GetOnline/Website>)
- Edicy Pages (<http://edicypages.com/en>)
- SynthaSite (www.synthasite.com)
- Snap Pages (<http://snappages.com>)
- Homestead (www.homestead.com)
- Bluevoda (www.bluevoda.com)

Low-cost tools

- SourceFuse Appstacks (www.appstacks.com)
- Communicate 2 (www.communicate2.com)
- Joomla (www.joomla.org)
- Drupal (<http://drupal.org>)
- OSMOSWeb SiteBuilder (<http://osmosweb.com/sitebuilder.htm>)

Disadvantages of free site builders

- Ads and other signs of it being free
- Limited disk space
- Low server reliability
- Lack of tech support
- Limited features
- Difficulty in scaling up
- Non-uniqueness



Suresh Reddy, chairman,
Ybrant Digital

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Vivek Bhargava, CEO, Communicate 2, commenting on the reluctance of businesses to set aside funds for Web development

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share of disadvantages too. For those companies that are able to set aside a small budget for developing their website, a better option would be to seek the services of an economical website/micro-site developer or company.

What do you want from the website?

Before looking at cost-effective options to build a website, you first need to define what you want your website to achieve. What features or functions are indispensable, and which ones would be *nice to have*? Knowing this is very important because it will help you judge any website development option in terms of not just your budget but also its effectiveness and efficiency.

Primarily, a website should display information about your product or service, have a shopping cart or a contact form, and provide details about the company. All this information should be presented in such a manner that is in line with the overall branding strategy

of the company. There should be a seamless usage of logos, colour codes, language, etc, like with other marketing material. In industries where uniqueness matters (e.g, fashion design), the website should stand out from the crowd!

The website should also be easily findable. That is, when somebody searches for related keywords in a search engine, they should be able to find this website amongst the top results.

Most importantly, a website should be user-friendly. Suresh Reddy, chairman, Ybrant Digital explains, “At a time, a visitor will be looking at five or six sites in the same category, and he/she will be spending just seconds in each of the sites. This calls for prominence of important information kept at eye-catching places in the site and features that are very easy to use, thus making it simple for the visitor. Visual appeal coupled with minimal copy to attract the interest of the prospect should get a site going.”

Option 1—Build a free website

One of the easiest ways of going online is to build a website using a free tool such as Googlepages, Yahoo! Geocities or Microsoft’s Small Business Office Live (check out the box for a list of such tools). Building a website using such a tool is as easy as signing up for free (or for a very low cost in some cases), choosing a domain name, selecting a design you like and filling in the data. Most of these website builders even provide a reasonable amount of storage and domain names for free or for a very low cost. Within a

day, your business will be online!

If it were so easy, then why don’t all businesses go for such solutions? Unfortunately, these come parcelled with a few disadvantages too.

Firstly, when you build a website using a free/low-cost website builder, you will have to choose from a set of fixed designs or templates that are provided. Not just you, but thousands of others will be using the same design – this kills the uniqueness of your website. “Most of these free tools have a built-in, specific number of templates, which aren’t really good if you are looking at your individual branding and identity in the global space,” comments Bhargava.

Often when you use a free tool, it shows in your domain name. For example, the moment somebody sees a domain with googlepages or geocities in it, they will know that the website has been built using a free tool! Some website builder tools even go to the extent of placing ads on the websites, so there is no mistaking it for a professional site.

Further, technical issues also arise. The website builder will provide you only a limited storage, which might not suffice as your Web presence grows. Since the service is free, there is no assurance of the reliability of the server and often no tech support either. So, website downtime and security issues might be high.

Since the features provided by such tools are limited, it is difficult to scale your website up. Unless the tool is open source, it is difficult or sometimes even impossible to build in more features later by employing a designer. "It is quite difficult to modify such sites as they are controlled and generally one does not have access to the code or the server they are hosted on. They are not designed to be able to grow," says Gautam Ghai, CEO, SourceFuse Technologies (I) Pvt.Ltd.

Another critical aspect of a website's efficiency is its search engine optimisation (SEO), i.e., how optimised the website is for quick discovery by search engines. If somebody searches for a related keyword on Google or Yahoo!, will your website feature amongst the top results? This is a key concern anybody has to address when building a business website.

When asked how sites built using free options work as far as SEO goes, Milind Mody, an expert in the field, opines, "It really depends on how

much importance was given to SEO by the developers. Our general experience over here at eBrandz is that most of these sites built on third-party platforms are very SEO unfriendly. We have worked with Yahoo! sites, OSCommerce, etc, in the past and have had big problems doing SEO for these platforms. Things have improved on the above two platforms, but as far as free web site builders, in general, are concerned, most of them are not SEO friendly. I do hope things change for the better. But if anyone wants an SEO friendly platform, they should ask: "Does this platform allow me to add unique page titles and Meta tags for all pages?" If the answer is yes, then the platform most probably is SEO friendly."

In all, issues such as lack of uniqueness, limited availability of features, insufficient tech support, etc, make it difficult to use such a free website in the long run. While it might do as a good starting point, your business would have to migrate to paid options later – because a website resonates with your company's image and has to grow correspondingly.

Bhargava explains, "Some international visitors might evaluate the website (even unknowingly) and link it to the image of the business and the business owner. Let's put it this way, professionalism will always stand out and communicate better. The best solution will be to invest appropriate time and money so that you can get better quality work done out of a website development team or company."



Gautam Ghai, CEO, SourceFuse Technologies (I) Pvt Ltd

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Option 2: Develop your website in-house

It is evident that at some point in time you have to give up on free tools and go for a professionally-developed website for your business. You can either recruit a good developer and do it in-house, or hire the services of an affordable website/micro-site development firm.

While developing a website from scratch can be expensive, it does not necessarily have to cost you an arm and a leg, thanks to the availability of several free/open source solutions and affordable templates.

One of the simplest options is to buy yourself a domain name and space on a reliable server, then recruit a Web developer, who can build a custom website for your business. “Nowadays, hosting solutions are very cheap, like cloud computing solutions, where one can host a website at a very low cost,” says Ghai.

A quick website can be built by buying a template from TemplateMonster or other such websites which sell Web templates for a small fee, and then uploading your content. A better option is to use an open source content management system (like Drupal or Joomla) – this ensures that your website is very flexible and scalable. You can customise it extensively to suit your brand image, and also add more features as the business grows.

Mody recommends Joomla: “I really like the

Joomla Content Management System. Although it is not easy for business owners to install or run Joomla themselves, the total cost of developing a Joomla system is much less compared to custom programming. Also, what works as an advantage is that there are hundreds of free modules available. Some high-end modules are also available by paying a small fee (to the developer).”

Another reliable and affordable option is SourceFuse’s Appstacks platform (www.appstacks.com).

Appstacks packages robust open source platforms as well as usage tools to build custom websites. These websites can be customised to meet most needs and come with cost-effective and flexible ongoing management and support packages, eliminating the need for any IT infrastructure investment.

On the other hand, really smart developers will probably take up the challenge of building the website entirely from scratch! In any case, if you find the right people and ensure the right tools are used, it is definitely possible to build a low-cost website. However, ensure that your developer works in association with consultants or companies like eBrandz and Communicate 2 to ensure that the site is well-optimised for all popular search engines.

Option 3: Outsource the development and maintenance of the site

It is not easy to find a good designer and developer. It is even tougher to maintain a website after it is built. "In cases where sites require a content management system, need to support an interface, position large data in a categorised manner or where sites require constant updating like news sites, then it's a challenge to keep things simple and error-free. There are also sites that require back-end support as a part of the online business activity that requires constant support," explains Reddy of Ybrant Digital.

In such cases, perhaps it would be wiser to outsource the development and maintenance of the website to a website or micro-site development firm. "The real challenge is in maintaining a website once it is created and effectively using it to its fullest potential. If a company does not intend to have a dedicated IT team managing the website with regular updates, etc, then it would be advisable to not build the website internally but have someone build and maintain it," says Ambardekar of GlobalLogic.

This might prove a bit expensive, but at least you can be assured that the project is in the right hands. Remember to look out for a company that focuses on the domestic market – some companies tend to worship international clients and give Indian clients a lower priority. Check with former clients to see how well and how fast their project was handled, and whether the billing was reasonable. Also, check out some of the websites built and maintained by the company over a period of time, before finalising the deal.

In all, whatever your budget and whatever the requirements and limitations, it is definitely possible to build a business website meeting those conditions. The real challenge is to sustain and make good use of this website. "Creating a website today does not require a lot of expertise or finances, there are ready made portals that can be used to build something easily or you can get it developed by a vendor. What is more important is for the company to realise the potential of the medium and its ability to reach out to reach out to perspective customers. Unless companies have a plan to do this, a website would not provide good value to them," sums up Ambardekar. ■



Pawan Ambardekar, senior manager
- Consumer BU (Web 2.0/Consumer
Internet, UI Design), GlobalLogic

"If the product or service requires daily updates on the website or requires people to interact, then having a good website is essential... A good example would be media companies."

Janani Gopalakrishnan Vikram

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