

## Develop a website for your business

An effective website is an asset to your business and pays for itself in the amount of traffic it attracts and business it generates. A website is often the first point of contact a potential customer has with a business, and needs to convey to potential customers who you are, what you offer and your point of difference – all within moments of them opening your page.

Before you launch in and set up a website, you will need to register a suitable domain name and have a fairly clear idea of what you want your website to achieve. This could include planning over several stages if you decide to start with a simple site and add additional functions as your business grows or as your confidence in maintaining or updating your website takes off.

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## Choosing and registering a domain name

Choosing your domain name is one of the most important decisions you will make because it affects how easy your business is to find online, which in turn underpins the success of your site.

Put yourself in the position of your customers and work out the key words they are likely to type into a search engine when looking for your business. This will give a good indication of the domain name or names you should look to register.

It is a good idea to keep your domain name as short as possible. If your business has a long name, consider registering an acronym. If you use two or more words, your customers are likely to have difficulty remembering whether the words run together, or are separated by a dot, hyphen or underscore. Also try to avoid names that people are likely to have difficulty spelling or that might have a controversial meaning in other cultures.

Your choice of domain name might be limited if the name you want is already registered. Once you have an idea of a few names you'd like to register, go to sites like [Discount Domains](#), [Free Parking NZ](#) or [Domainz](#) to find out which domain names are available. The New Zealand Domain Name Commission has a list of registered domain name suppliers that you can use. It's a good idea to check the prices (and additional services) offered by several suppliers before deciding to register your domain name with an Internet Service Provider (ISP).

Chances are that you'll be faced with a number of options to consider. If you are aiming at a local Kiwi market, you might decide on a .co.nz site. If you're thinking of moving into the export market or opening an online store with customers overseas, your purpose might be better served with a .com, .net or .biz domain.

If you decide to register your domain yourself, make sure the site where you register the domain name does not tie you into any further contracts. If you decide to let your website designer register the domain name for you (many offer this service), make sure that they register the domain in your name and not in their name. If the site is not in your name, it can sometimes be tricky to move your website business elsewhere if the business relationship sours.

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## Define the purpose of your site

You will need a clear idea of what you want your website to achieve before you start to plan or design your site. The functions you expect the site to fulfil over the short, medium and long-term will affect the design platform used, the features that are built in, and the look and feel of the site.

Try to define why you want or need a website. Is it to showcase your products or services, to establish credibility, to build a database of people interested in your product, to provide an online price and product specification list or to sell online?

You'll also need to decide whether you'll want all those features at once, or whether you want to build them up over time. Thinking about what you want to achieve at different stages will ensure you don't waste time and money developing a website, only to have to repeat the process (and the expense) later because you did not plan your site with your future needs in mind.

You might decide to start with a simple web presence of a few pages, with the intention of adding functionality as your budget, customer base, or website proficiency increases. For example, you might start with a home page, a 'contact us' page, and one or two other pages, and then add on the option to have customers sign up for a monthly newsletter. You might add a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) page, and then look to include an online shopping facility or a discussion forum.

These needs should be identified before you sit down to plan your website. It is a good idea to spend time online exploring other websites from similar businesses. You might well discover a whole lot of options and features that you did not know existed.

Draw up a list of design elements and features that you like. Rank them in order of importance, and draw up a list of the features you'd need to achieve the core purpose of your site separately from the features that you feel would be nice to have. This will help you decide whether to include them or not when you start getting quotes.

Keep a list of web pages that you really like so that you can refer back to them or show them to web designers as examples of the style or functionality you are looking for.

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## What information should you include?

The information you include on your site will depend on a number of factors, including:

- The core function(s) of your website
- Your budget
- Your target audience.

The purpose of your site will determine the type and amount of information on your site, and the way the information is presented. Using a hardware business as an example, a DIY website for the general public will be very different from a website targeting people in the building trade. The site for the general public would present information in layman's terms while the site for the building trade would be more jargon-heavy and loaded with product specifications – the sort of information that would result in an information overload for most home-based DIY people.

It is important to remember that online, the competition is as close as a mouse click away. When people are unable to find the information they are looking for on your site, they're likely to give up and look elsewhere. Most business websites incorporate at least a home page with an overview of the business, a page with contact details and a map or directions, as well as an FAQs page.

It is a good idea to map out your web pages (sometimes called wireframing) and to develop a logical way to present your information. This will make your web designer's job easier and ensure that your website is easy to navigate.

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## What features should you include?

Although a fancy website with animation and sound can look impressive, it is easy to go overboard, both in terms of budget and design. Be careful not to include too many bells and whistles that could make your website slow to access. As a rule of thumb, your web page should download in 10 seconds or less.

Too many images or rich media can slow your site down. Also be wary of using a lot of HTML frames, JavaScript, AJAX or Flash. These can prevent some users and search engines from viewing your site.

There are social media plug-ins which can be used to embed Facebook and Twitter content on your own website. This is a good way to drive traffic and encourage interaction. If you decide not to embed content, you should include social media links to direct potential customers to your blogs and other social media offerings.

Your budget and core reasons for wanting a website will guide the set of features you're likely to include on your website. Useful features to consider include: the facility for customers to sign up for a monthly newsletter, a gallery for images, or a discussion forum for customers.

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## Options for building your site

Once you have an idea of why you want a website, the purpose it will serve and the functional elements you want to include, the next step is to decide whether to create a DIY site or get professional help.

There are a number of software packages you can learn and then use to build your own website from scratch. This is likely to be the cheapest option in terms of financial outlay, but it will take a lot of time and effort (and trial and error) to create a professional-looking site. The question to ask is: is this the most effective use of your time?

Another option is to get a web design company to build a basic website from templates. These sites are relatively quick to set up and the company will usually provide you with instructions and training to enable you to add web pages and update your site when you want to. The drawback is that design options and functionality can be limited, but this is a quick, affordable and increasingly popular option for small businesses.

You can also ask a web design company to design an original site for you. This has a longer lead time and is likely to require a larger budget, but will enable you to completely customise the look and feel of your site. You will need to invest a lot of time in planning and designing your site, and in working with the designers to ensure you get a slick and professional site that can grow with you as your business grows.

If you decide to use a web design company, ask for a detailed cost estimate and an expected date-of-delivery. Have a look at other sites they have designed and ask to speak to a few of their customers to see if they are happy with both the design work and the after-sales service offered.

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## Design tips

You'll get the best results if you keep your website design simple and consistent. Other tips to bear in mind:

- People tend to skim read online - use lots of subtitles and bullet points to get your message across.
- Write simply so that the text on your site is easy to understand, and get it professionally proof read to avoid any unprofessional grammatical and spelling errors on your website.

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