**Creating a Website: Planning Document**

Everyone seems to have a story about a friend making thousands of dollars a month with web-driven business. There are ads on television, hundreds of work-at-home classifieds, and you've got that nagging feeling that maybe it is time for you to create an online business. Of course you know that some claims must be exaggerated, but the internet has grown from an outpost of dot.com startups to a dominant force for business.

You've already got an idea, you feel ready to start, but hold on, there's a lot more thinking to do before you start getting domain names and drawing up page layouts. Creating a planning document will make the difference between success and failure.

**Website Goals**:
What is your objective? What do you hope to achieve with this website? (other than make money) Be specific. Say "Build and grow my customer database in order to increase repeat sales by 30%." Not, "get more customer sales".
**Strategy**:
What methodology are you going to use to achieve these goals?

**Some objectives: (more than one may apply)**
To establish a Web presence for an existing business
To sell a product or service to a global market
To improve (or streamline) customer/member service
To keep existing customers/ members informed of new products and services
To make product or price information and updates available 24/7
To provide a community service, advocate a cause or position
To sell advertising, affiliate links and 3$^{rd}$ party offers
To generate sales leads or contact lists
To drive retail or other traffic to a physical location

Without an objective, the website won't go anywhere, and the internet is full of websites with just that problem!

**Is there a specific deadline you have to meet**? A trade show or event that the site has to be ready for? Give yourself plenty of time (at least 6 months) from planning to launch. At By the time you've finished the planning document you'll know how much help is needed to get the site done in time.

**Create a keyword list**. Make a list of every word, phrase, synonym, and word cluster that could be used to describe your product/service and site objective.  You should have no fewer than 10 words/phrases.

**Who are your competitors?**  Using combinations of those keywords, do a thorough search to see who (and how many) are trying to do the same as you. Thoroughly examine the sites that seem to be the closest to your idea. Are they well done? Do they make it easy to achieve their goal? How big is the company, and who do they think their visitors

are? Find out how you are offering or providing something that they are clearly missing. Better service? Serving a local market? Lower prices? Friendlier staff? Discover how to present yourself to the public that sets your business apart from competitors.

**Who is your audience?** Can you create a "profile" of the average visitor you want to attract?  (age, gender, background, technology level). What is your audience's "pain point"? What problem will they be looking to solve when they arrive at your site? A good profile will guide your focus: as each aspect of your site is planned ask yourself "Would my profile audience respond favorably?". This will help you anticipate problems and provide a clear path to success.

**What image do you want to communicate?** Your audience will determine the look that you want to give your website. Calming colors with smooth transitions, eye-popping images that build excitement, creating a welcoming feel is vital to your success.

**What do you want your visitors to do?** When they land on your site, you'll need to create a plan to "lead" them though the site to your goal. Many websites that look quite nice at first glance confuse the first time visitor who doesn't know what to click on first. Make sure you plan a path for them to take, anticipate questions with answers and "sell" each click.

**Who will be writing the website content?** Writers familiar with Search Engine Optimization (SEO) can help you get ranked fairly high by most search engines. By using your keywords in page titles, file names, content and links, a website's ranking can make a dramatic jump while still speaking in a meaningful way to your audience.

**What applications will you need?** A shopping cart program, a database to collect subscription or contact information, password protection, surveys, calendars, site search, all require scripts and programming services, which can add time and money to your original estimate.

You should be able to create the outline of a good plan from your answers. This will help you get an accurate price quote and time frame.