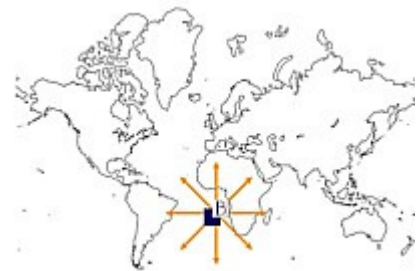

A WEBSITE FOR YOUR BUSINESS?

Exploring the possibilities

John Turner at Burgh House helps businesses and other organisations to answer the question “*Do we need a website, and if so, how should we get one?*”

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Part 1: Do we need a website?

This is the first of a short series of articles about having a website for your business or charity organisation, and today I will pose (and help you answer) the question: *should we have a website?* But before we start, I'll make an important promise. These articles will be, as far as humanly possible, non-technical. So if you don't know what an IP address is or how to set up a DNS server it won't matter a bit. And if I do have to use technical terms I will explain them. I've been building websites for more than ten years, for my own organisations and for customers, and I promise that you won't need to know anything that the average person can't understand. The only thing I will assume is that you have used the Internet and seen a few websites.

So does your organisation need a website? Or, to put it another way, is a website going to justify the time and costs of creating and maintaining it? What will people use your website for? Who will use it and how will that benefit you? And what are the costs anyway? Let's answer these in order.

WHAT WILL THEY USE IT FOR?

Think of your website primarily as an online brochure. If you run a business it's your opportunity to tell people what you do, to find new customers, suppliers or business partners. If you run a charity you may be able to reach new supporters, or people who can help you achieve your aims. You could tell people about your products and/or services. You could tell them your operating hours, or advertise special offers. You could tell them about your aims and objectives, business ethics, history and anything else that may encourage them to buy from you or support you in whatever way you need.

There are also websites that allow users to actually make purchases directly through the Internet. This can be very cost effective for large retail organisations but for a number of legal and technical reasons that is not currently practical on St. Helena and I will not discuss them further

Think of a website as a way of advertising your organisation to the world.

WHO WILL USE OUR WEBSITE?

There are about 1.5 billion Internet users in the world, which is a very large potential audience for your site. But who do you actually want to read about your organisation? It's all very exciting knowing that someone in Mongolia has read about your business on the Internet but does that justify the effort of setting up the site?



And if you only ever deal with people who are already on St. Helena, is there any value in having a website? St. Helena has around 1,000 website users but how many of us would use the Internet to find out about a local organisation? Most of us would just ask or pick up the 'phone. Do you get your news from either www.saint.fm or www.news.co.sh? Or do you listen to the radio and read the newspaper?

So the most likely reason to have a website is to reach people who are not currently on St. Helena - of which the biggest groups are likely to be Saints overseas who use the Internet to stay in touch with home, and others who are interested in St. Helena such as potential tourists and past visitors.

If you have something that you want these people to know about then the Internet can be an excellent way to reach them. And if you put up a well designed and interesting site, people will look at it. We monitor the usage of the websites we own or run for our customers and we know that people around the world do view St. Helena websites, and they do react to what they see. They use the details on the site to make contact to discuss what they have read, such as enquiring about holiday rentals or discussing potential business opportunities.

So for now your website will mostly help you reach Saints and others overseas. And as internet usage on St. Helena increases (and, hopefully, becomes cheaper) maybe more local people may start using the Internet for local purposes as well as to use overseas sites.

All very encouraging, but before we get carried away, how expensive is all this going to be?

HOW MUCH WILL MY SITE COST ME?

The answer is that, like a car or a house, it will cost as much as you can justify spending.

It's possible to create yourself a basic presence on the Internet for no cost whatsoever and in very little time. Probably the simplest way is to set up a 'weblog' or 'blog'. This is an Internet site to which you can post messages using no more sophisticated technology than you need to send an email. Go to www.blogger.com to learn more. You could blog about your organisation, about your products or services, indeed about whatever you want people to see. The only limitation is that a blog is like reading a string of emails. It can be hard to get the overall picture and to find specific things. It's free but it's a bit basic.

Email providers such as Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com) allow users to set up simple websites as part of their email package, and if you have a Silver or Gold broadband package then some website space comes free with that. If you need more space than you can get for free then by buying wisely you can get a lot of website for very little cost.

But this is just empty space (a bit like a land plot) - you need to build a site to go into it. How much that costs depends on what you want, from tens of pounds to as many millions as you can afford. Unless you have excellent computer skills you will need help or a good website design package, both of which will cost money and time.

A quality website may not be cheap but it can be very valuable for your organisation, entirely justifying the costs and time spent developing and maintaining it.

SO THE ANSWER IS...

To answer the question I posed at the beginning: your business, charity or whatever organisation needs a website if it needs to reach people overseas and if, having reached



those people, they will buy from you or otherwise help you to achieve your aims and objectives. How much you should spend on your website can be decided based on how much benefit you expect to get from those contacts.

And to get the most from the people who do reach your website, you need to design it well. I'll talk about designing a good website in Part 2.

Part 2: Designing an attractive website

In Part 1 we considered whether your organisation would benefit from having a website. You're still reading so I'll assume you decided that it might. Today we will look at how to design your site and choose a domain name (that's the www.what-ever-you-decide-you-want-to-call-it.com name that is the unique address of your site).

STYLE AND CONTENT

As with anything you design, the two key issues are style - how will it look - and content - what it will contain. Both are important. A poorly presented website will discourage potential readers, even if the content is useful. And a glossy but 'empty' site possibly even worse, suggesting that you have nothing useful to say. Let's start with content.

BEING CONTENT WITH YOUR CONTENT

You will have decided already the purpose of your website; who it is intended to reach, what it is intended to tell them and what you want them to do as a result. Your content will be driven by that. If you want to inform customers about products they can buy then your content will be focussed on those products and the benefits they can offer to your customers. If you are a charity seeking supporters, you would focus on the good that you do, the help that you need and how people can get in touch to offer that help.

I recommend that you get your content sorted out before you start thinking about style because it's easier to fit a style around some good content than it is to fit the content into what may turn out to be an inappropriate style. And be aware that search engines (e.g. [Google™](http://www.google.com) and the new '[bing](http://www.bing.com)' from Microsoft™) respond only to content and ignore style, so if you want people to find your site via search engines you'll need good content.

Think also about how your content might, and indeed should, change over time. Users get bored with sites that don't change. So, make allowances for new products or services and how they would be linked in. And behind the products and services there is your organisation - don't forget to tell people about yourselves, your aims and objectives, your ways of working and anything else that your audience will find useful. If you're still not content about your content consider signing up for the [AVES Business Writing course](http://www.avesbusinesswriting.com), which will tell you all you need to know about what to put, not just in websites but in all kinds of business documents.

So now you have content - what about style?

A KILLER STYLE?

What do you make of this site: www.laphotocabine.com?

One of the features of the Internet is the remarkable range of gadgets, widgets, toys and other objects with which you can adorn your site, both visual and audio. You can have



scrolling banners, flashing text, an eye-watering selection of colours and fonts, background music, popups, dropdowns and so on. And if you build your site using one of the standard website building packages (about which more in Part 3) you will be presented with - and possibly encouraged to use - all of these. My advice on this is simple: don't, and there is a very good reason for this. The fancy presentation that you like so much when you see it first becomes tedious fairly quickly and downright irritating soon after. If someone is trying to read about your services they don't want bits flashing on the edge of their vision. They don't want to struggle to make out the words on the fancy background. They don't want the menu to keep sliding out of view just when they wanted to use it and they don't want the machine singing to them unexpectedly, particularly if they happen to be sneaking a peek at your site in the office when they should really be doing some work. Anyone can use a straightforward and clear site but few can - or will - use a site which makes their head spin after ten seconds. Make sure you have popups blocked, don sunglasses, and only then go to <http://www.angelfire.com/super/badwebs/> for an illustration.

Remember also that readers may not have perfect eyesight (avoid poor colour combinations) may not have the same quality computer screen as you (avoid tiny text) and may not have English as their first language (avoid long words and complicated sentences). Images help but keep them moderately sized so they don't take ages to appear on the user's screen (more about this too in Part 3).

Simple and smart should be your aim, with the same style as you use for your printed promotional materials (i.e. using the principles of good branding). The business writing course can help here too.

THE .COM OR .SH QUESTION

You may be aware that the Internet has no rules, but it does have some standards, even if they are not always obeyed. If you see a site with a domain name ending in '.co.uk' you can probably assume that it is a UK company, but don't rely on it. '.com' could be anywhere in the world (including St. Helena) but is often used by American companies who should really use '.co.us'. '.fm' should be the Federation of Micronesia but radio stations the world over use it, as TV stations use the name assigned to Tuvalu. So if you are a St. Helena business should you use '.co.sh' or '.com' (or '.ac' in Ascension)? If you are a non-commercial organisation should you use '.org.sh' or just '.org'? The answer is: it doesn't really matter. Nobody will presume that a '.sh' domain is necessarily in St. Helena or that a '.com' name isn't. I always use '.com'/''.org' but that's largely a personal preference (although burghouse.com costs us £10 per annum whereas burghouse.sh would have cost us £60 per annum - see www.nic.sh for details). I'll also explain 'hosting' next week where choosing '.com' can have some cost advantages.

SO NOW YOU KNOW . . .

So now you have content that will encourage those who come to your site to stay and do what you intend as a result of their visit (buy, help, respond or whatever); you've resisted the temptation to design an online pinball machine and instead have planned a site that is smart, clear and easy to navigate; and you've chosen a suitable domain name.

Now all you have to do is build and launch the site. I'll talk about building your website in Part 3.



Part 3: Building and launching your website

In this third and final article about having a website for your business or charity organisation we will look at how to actually build and launch your site.

With most construction jobs the options are: do it yourself, or get someone to do it for you. Websites are no different. We'll look at each of these first.

DO IT YOURSELF

Anyone can build a website. All you have to do is learn to write HTML and JavaScript, which is basically computer programming (if you want to see what HTML looks like select View and then Source from your browser menu). For a tiny proportion of people this is a viable option. That's how I do it, but then I started my career as a computer programmer.

If you don't fancy that idea you need to buy a website design package. These all do basically the same thing: they allow you to design your site in an easy way (a bit like laying out a document in a word processor) and then you press a button and it produces the HTML etc. for you. Most will even manage the process of uploading - i.e. transferring the files to the 'host', which actually makes the site live. If you're good at using a PC for tasks like word processing and presentation design you will probably be able to produce a good result with one of these, though how easy it will be to use and how good the output will be depends on how much you pay for the package, which can range from free to £400 ('Dreamweaver', on Amazon.co.uk).

I also have a technical criticism of these packages: they seem to generate far more code than is necessary. More code takes up more space on your host so it costs you more to run your site. But perhaps that's just the programmer in me speaking - the 'I can do it better than any machine' conviction. That's why I don't use them but there are really only two questions you need to ask.

The first is: do I have the skills to do this? And the second is: do I have the time? Does your busy workload give you space for the hours you will spend building and updating your site, and is this a good use of your time? If you're not sure then maybe you should enquire about having a site built for you.

CALL IN THE PROFESSIONALS...

You don't need to go overseas to find website designers, there are several people on St. Helena who can build a website for you (*including - you knew I was going to say this - me*).

The big advantage of having someone else build a site for you is that you get the benefits of their experience. A good website builder will help you with the design and will advise if your ideas are not right either for your target audience or on technical grounds (e.g. the widgets and gadgets you've asked for will slow the site down, so users will get bored waiting for the page to load and go elsewhere).

Most websites say somewhere who build them (that's how we all advertise) so have a look at some St. Helena sites; select the ones whose look and feel appeals to you; then contact the builder and ask for an estimate. It could well be that it's cheaper to have your site built for you than to buy a copy of Dreamweaver.



"MAY GOD BLESS HER AND ALL WHO SAIL IN HER . . ."

There are two parts to launching your site: a techie bit and a marketing bit. You can skip the techie bit if your site is being built for you as the builder can advise on that.

THE TECHIE BIT

A website is a collection of files, comprising blocks of text and HTML/JavaScript code, image files and others. To be live on the Internet these files have to be put somewhere that is connected 24/7/365 to the Internet, with a 100% uptime power supply (on St Helena?) and sophisticated protection against hackers and other malevolent individuals. Unless you are in possession of such a computer suite you probably want your site hosted by someone who does. On island you are limited to Cable & Wireless but your files don't have to be here - the Internet is truly global and your files can sit anywhere in the world. Burghouse.com is hosted in the UK, as are many other St. Helena sites. Hosting off-island has some advantages, of which the main ones are: 1st, it's cheaper - the UK market for website hosting is very competitive so costs are low; and 2nd, the sites are faster, so your customers wait less time to see your pages. Hosts advertise but I'm happy to recommend the one we use (and have used for ten years) if you contact us.

When you sign up for hosting the provider will send detailed instructions about how to upload your files and get data about how your site is being used, by whom and when. You can use this data to analyse how well your site is reaching its target market.

MARKETING YOUR SITE

How will people discover your website? If you are relying on them finding it via internet searches you would be wise to alert the search engines to its arrival. For Google go to <http://www.google.co.uk/addurl.html> and for Microsoft's new 'bing' go to <http://www.bing.com/docs/submit.aspx> (you don't need to register with every search engine, as they all learn from each other). Be aware that it may take several weeks for them to add your site to their list, though if your site is being professionally built your builder should know a few tricks to get things to happen faster.

But the most immediate way to advertise your site is to advertise your site. For a launch we did recently we took a half page advert in the newspapers and got a massive number of 'hits' (i.e. people accessing the site), starting from Friday lunchtime. Clearly lots of people bought the newspaper with their lunch, saw the advert and dashed back to the office to check it out.

Another effective method is to email all your friends and contacts to tell them about the site. Give them the site address (URL); summarise what they will find there; perhaps tease them a little about the contents; then leave them to check it out.

If you use Facebook (www.facebook.com), Bebo (www.bebo.com) or whatever, don't forget to mention your new site on there.


AND FINALLY . . .

So now you know what to do about a website for your business, charity or other group. You know how to decide whether you need a website; how to design it; how to build it (or get it professionally built for you) and how to let everyone know it's there. All you have to do now is keep your site up-to-date with your latest news and activities so that your readers will want to keep coming back for more. **Welcome to the Internet!**



Contacts

I hope you found the articles interesting and informative. If you want to discuss any of the issues raised in this article, or have feedback or suggestions for further articles, please [contact us](#).

Our website design and delivery capabilities are described on the  [Burgh House Software](#) website.

John Turner

Director, Burgh House Limited – <http://burghouse.com>

