



NAHB Building Business Briefs

A Service of the Business Management & Information Technology Committee

Boost Your Business With a Dynamic Web Site

These days, if your company doesn't have a Web site, potential home buyers wonder if your business and the homes you build are behind the times. They think that perhaps your company is "too small" to have a Web site, and therefore inadequate to serve their needs.

It's like living in a one-street town that doesn't appear on the map. Local residents know it's there, but it will never be a destination for travelers. And, since nobody has a 100 percent sales-to-closing ratio, you need as many "travelers" (or prospects) as you can get.

Do I Really Need a Web Site?

You need a Web site if:

- You have homes and/or services to sell
- You want people to know your company's name
- You want to build a brand
- You want to make more money (who *doesn't*?)
- You want to expand your market

You may think your company really is too small to have a Web site. Or perhaps you think you're too busy to develop one, or that you don't need one because all your jobs come from referrals. The fact is, you'll lose valuable prospects and sales if you don't have a Web presence. Today's tech-savvy buyers don't turn to the Yellow Pages when they want to gather information quickly—they turn to the Internet. And buyers are shopping for homes online like never before.

Web Site Essentials

Luckily, it's pretty easy and inexpensive to establish a Web presence. Here are the basic ingredients of a good company Web site:

- **Hosting company.** You need an Internet Service Provider (ISP) to host your site or provide a "home" for it on the Internet. With all the competition, ISP accounts are dirt-cheap these days. Some ISPs even offer free Web page hosting if you sign up for an e-mail account. And some of those are free, too. If you're not sure which ISP is best for you, ask your home builders association which one(s) their members use.

- **Company name.** Your company name should reflect what you do or build. Short company names “read” better online than long ones. If you have a logo, include it on your Web site, too.
- **Address.** Include it somewhere on your site. People want to know you’ve got a sticks-and-bricks business, and that they’re not dealing with some faceless Internet entity. Letting them know where your company is located helps build trust.
- **Contact information.** Include several ways for prospects to get in touch, such as phone number, fax number, and e-mail address. Publish your office hours online and invite prospects to stop in.

Some big corporations hold prospects at arm’s reach by not publishing their business addresses or phone numbers on their Web sites and only providing e-mail addresses or inquiry forms for contact. If they don’t want to be “bothered” by personal contact with prospects, they probably distance themselves from their customers in other ways, too. That doesn’t fly in the home building industry. Besides, what do you do if you only have e-mail contact and your server goes down?

People want warm fuzzies from a company they do business with, especially when they’re making one of the most important purchases of their lives. Show off your great customer service by treating people warmly even before they’re your customers.

- **Product information.** Lists the types of homes you build as well as locations and prices. Mention options, special features, and services you provide. Give prospects as much information as possible. If they don’t find it on your site, they’ll look for it somewhere else.
- **Keywords.** Make sure the front page of your site mentions the main things you want your company to be known for—single-family homes, colonials, Mediterranean villas, condominiums, active adult housing, move-up homes, custom homes, remodeling, additions, etc.

Keywords don’t have to be in large type, but they should be somewhere on your front page so that your Web site will pop up when people enter any of those keywords into search engines.

- **Graphic elements.** Include a few photos of your homes. You don’t need a slideshow of all your models or every custom home you’ve built. Post digital pictures of your best ones, or homes that have won awards. In addition to showing off your work, photos add graphic interest to a Web page.

Pay attention to download speed when you’re selecting digital photos for your Web site. Don’t put up large, high-resolution photos that take forever to download; prospects may

quit your site and go elsewhere. .JPG-format digital photos are the easiest ones to post and view online.

It's okay to include one or possibly two animated features such as a blinking e-mail button or a revolving arrow that invites people to look at the rest of your site, but resist the urge to make everything blink or move. You don't want your Web site to look like a fast-food commercial

- **Fresh content.** Swap pictures every so often. If you post articles of interest to buyers (for example, press releases about your company or stories about your homes from the local paper), replace them regularly with new ones. Make sure everyone knows about the most recent awards you've won. Update client testimonials. Post bios and photos of different staff members each month. People won't return to your site if it never changes.
- **Good navigation.** Make it easy for people to move around your site. Use a navigation bar (a horizontal or vertical bar with tabs or pull-down menus that take users to various sections) and repeat it on every page. It's best to have sections open in new windows (that is, on separate pages) so that people can close sections they're finished viewing without automatically closing out of your Web site.

Bright Ideas

Want to increase traffic to your Web site? Try the following:

- Develop a company newsletter and put it online as a .PDF document. Prospects will learn even more about your company and the homes you build. Current customers enjoy seeing news about your company online and enjoy pointing it out to friends, co-workers, and neighbors—which means more referrals.

(Want to see an electronic newsletter for home buyers? Check out the one Stebnitz Builders of Delavan, Wisc., posts on its Web site at www.stebnitzbuilders.com. Click "Info Center" once you've arrived at the site.)

- Put up a fun online poll or a survey for customers and prospects and be sure to change it often. Providing opportunities for people to interact with your site increases repeat visits—and the opportunity to bond with your company.
- Does your Web site include a Flash intro? Consider scrapping it, or provide an option for people to skip the intro and go directly to your home page. Flash can make some older machines and those with limited memory crash. Plus it's just plain annoying for prospects to have to sit through a Flash presentation of a moving logo or images when they want to find out as soon as possible who builds and sells homes in their price range. People want information *immediately* on the Internet.

- Think of the questions homeowners ask you most frequently about warranty issues, and post them on a Web site page with accompanying answers. Include a phone number and e-mail button, too, in case homeowners need more information.

This material is excerpted from Business Basics for Builders, a brand-new guide to effective business management that features hands-on exercises, sample forms and documents, and tricks of the trade from 12 industry experts. Users will learn how to develop strategic and business plans, set up accounting systems, organize field and office operations, manage change orders, and work with trade contractors, among other topics. The book is \$24.75 for NAHB members and \$27.50 for non-members. Call 800-223-2665 or visit www.builderbooks.com to order it online.

Be Part of the Solution!

Do you:

- *Have questions about the Web?*
- *Want to learn how to make the best use of technology in your home building or remodeling business?*
- *Have technology tips to share with your peers?*

Come join us at the Information Technology Work Group, a sub group of the Standing Committee on Business Management and Information Technology. We're looking for more contractors to help us brainstorm articles, booklets, Web content, and other tech-related business management resources for NAHB's members. Feel free to drop in at the Information Technology Work Group's next meeting on Saturday, January 17, 2004, from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m. in the Las Vegas Convention Center (location details to come later). You don't have to be a Committee member to attend.

Questions? E-mail Marcia Childs at mchilds@nahb.com or Jill Tunick at jtunick@nahb.com.

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