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Internet tips for startups

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NEW DELHI: In the tradition of roti, kapda and makaan, the three basic things most startups need to survive today are: skilled entrepreneurs, funds and, believe it or not, a website!



Many fledgling companies today make it a priority to have a web presence even before they commence operations on the ground.

So whether it is a small-time business setup or a larger brick and mortar entity you are launching, a website is like the screwdriver in a toolbox that you really can't do without. Says Rajeev Karwal, CEO and founder of Milagrow Business and Knowledge Solutions, "Internet domains are the most cost-effective method of getting your message across to a huge audience.

In fact, it is a very personal way of connecting with them. Unfortunately, only one or two percent of small companies use their websites effectively today." There are quite a few reasons: low connectivity, low awareness and a tendency to "outsource and forget" what is treated as a necessary evil.

Also, a website is not just a one-time investment of time or money—it demands constant attention and up gradation. But as these entrepreneurs prove an attractive and well-tended website can be a key pillar of success and growth.

Sameer Patange is an old hand in the tattooing and piercing business. The 29-year young artist, who makes anything between Rs 15-20 lakh every year, has clients ranging from Bollywood artists to models and normal folks. He is also net-savvy.

Patange started his own website with help from a friend, around two years ago. He knew that this way his art would be showcased not only to Indian customers but prospective clients abroad, as well. "It's a competitive world in my line of work and one has to be professional. I was the first tattoo artist to start a website," he claims. It cost him Rs 35,000 to design and host the site but adds that it was well worth it, given the benefits.

"People who search for tattoo artists on the Web reach my page and get in touch with me. People also send hyperlinks to their friends, and that adds to my business," says Patange.

A well designed website isn't important only for those in creative professions such as art, design or advertising. The design of a corporate website too should combine functionality and visual appeal in equal measure. Simplicity is a tool that many companies use quite effectively.

Phanindra Sama, founder of RedBus, a company that offers bus ticket reservations both online and offline, says, "We had a strict rule: on the home page, we would display only those elements that were strictly required." Sama and his colleagues decided not to hire an outside agency when one of the designers they approached asked for a "ridiculous" sum of Rs 30 lakh to design a couple of website templates and conduct market tests in various geographies.

Sama and his team sat down and worked out the details—they tried various colours and then decided on a simple red and white theme. A majority of space was given to ticket booking utilities while the 'About Us' and other sections were downplayed. They also added their own quirky touch: a link that read 'Boss is watching? Look Busy' under the dropdown boxes.

On clicking this link, the user out pops a spreadsheet called 'I love my Boss' which is populated with important looking data and bar charts. Laughs Sama, "That was the brainchild of Mayank Bidawatka, our marketing head, who came up with this idea out of the blue. People were initially puzzled by it, but many of them had a good laugh when they tried it out."

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In an individually run business, it may be appropriate to give the website a personal touch. As someone who claims to have done tattoos on over 50,000 people, Patange is a well-known brand and his website is a reflection of him. It not only portrays his creative talent but also gives insights into his personality and hobbies and tries to change the impression that tattooing is a profession to be looked down on. He adds that many old clients who had lost contact with him, tracked him down through his website.

You corporate websites could also make the difference between getting and losing customers especially when you are a small venture.

Hemali Chandria started Talent Scout, an HR consultancy in Mumbai in April this year. She says, "I started at home and was doing pretty well... we were placing about 15 people a month. But increasingly we saw that clients as well as job-seekers, when approached, asked us to give them our website URL, following which they would get back to us. It was like if we didn't have a website, we weren't to be taken seriously!"

She immediately sat down with friends and began designing a new website. The actual development of the site was outsourced to a small agency called Seventh Sense, though Chandria provided the basic outline.

She says, "The look and content was developed after researching existing recruitment sites, though we didn't lift anything 'as is'. We also made it clear that we wanted it to be user-friendly, with features like direct CV uploads and vacancies posted online." She expects her consultancy business to grow significantly in the weeks and months following the website's launch. "A company portal gives us a clear advantage over local outfits and we look forward to that," she smiles.

A well-designed website is just the beginning--value-adds and innovative features can often fetch you much more. Says Karwal, "A corporate website that goes beyond its regular features and offers something significantly extra (information, entertainment or utility tools and resources, for example) will get a better response from its audience."

Take Bangalore-based Thomas Mookken for example. In January 2005, Mookken and his wife who were then in the US, had a baby boy--Ayden--who was diagnosed with G6PD, an Inborn Error of Metabolism (IEM) after undergoing a Newborn Screening Program test. G6PD can be fatal in some cases but is very easily treated, if diagnosed in time.

In 2006, Mookken shifted to India and along with Dr Rohit Cariappa formed Neogen Labs, which would offer Newborn Screening Tests. Customers can also place orders for test kits on its website. Neogen labs have married two key aspects online: business and social enterprise. With clients such as Wockhardt in Bangalore, Fortis in Delhi, and Sunrise in Cochin, the firm uses the site more to spread awareness about the disorder.

"Many people do not know what these kinds of disorders are. So we are making the site a valuable resource to know about the disorders, and then know about the treatment," says Mookken. After learning more about this disorder, people can then go ahead and order on the same site. Mookken personally worked with the web designer to make it user friendly. "Navigation was important as first-time users, who are not that Internet savvy, needed to be able to use it," he says.

A corporate website is not just for companies to talk AT their audience; it also provides channels for people to talk back to them. The bulk of traffic on Karwal's website goes to the blog section. "Even if I don't post for a long time, I continue getting comments and responses in my inbox," he says. And with hiring being a perennial concern for most organisations, the 'careers' link has become an irreplaceable part of most websites.

Manish Chandra, promoter and founder of Entasis India Ltd., a design solutions firm, says, "We started our website a year after the company was founded eight years ago. Then, the aim was to showcase our strengths via our portfolio. Today, our site not only brings us business enquiries, but also gets queries from 5-10 undergraduate students in design institutes every month. Though we don't hire so many people, it is gratifying to know that they've seen our work and want to be a part of our organisation."

At the end of the day, as the startup grows, the website should mature as well. Anybody can start a website; innovating and maintaining it is the real challenge. However, as any of these entrepreneurs will tell you, the direct and indirect benefits are more than worth the money it costs to have your very own corporate identity on the www.

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