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Website Architecture & Design

Last month we discussed how to select and establish your website on the Internet. We now focus on the design and construction of your website.

Content, Content, Content

Location may be the leading factor in real estate selection, but good content is the core of a great website. Too often a solid foundation (see last month's Technology Matters) is built including an attractive design containing eye-popping graphics, but there is no content. Visitors may be initially impressed, but you will have provided little reason for them to remain or return to your website.

What Type of Website Do You Need?

Set specific objectives for your website. Is informing and educating the visitor about your services accomplished with a brochure-type site? Or do you want to interact with your visitors with a transactional site?

A "brochure" site is the easiest to build since it involves static pages and no programming. Brochure sites usually have basic information about your services, location and hours of operation. They make heavy use of marketing copy and photographs to entice prospective renters and owners to visit.

The next level of complexity is a "catalog" site that lists your properties for rent including descriptions and pictures. Some programming is required to facilitate manual entry and updating of the listing information or for a connection with your property management software to automate this update process.

The most comprehensive functionality is provided with a "transactional" site using portals to interact with specific visitors. The visitor must be authenticated to prevent unauthorized access and use of the system and encryption techniques must be used to protect the privacy of the data.

A prospect portal not only provides current property listings, but allows the prospective resident to express interest, request additional information, schedule an appointment, and complete an application including paying the application fee. Ideally, the

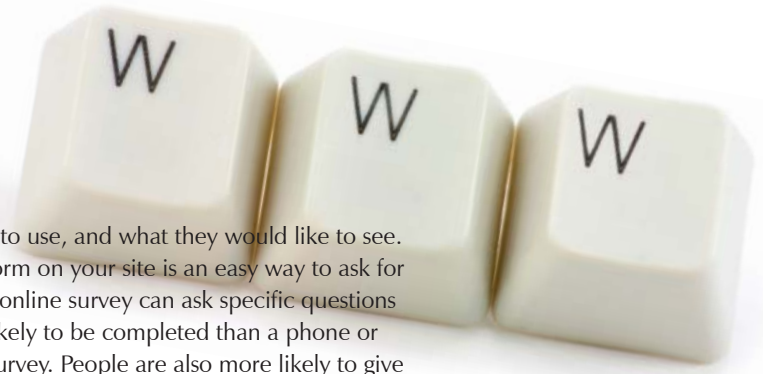
application information would flow directly into your property management software package. A resident portal provides current and past statements, work order status and entry, and rent payment. An owner portal provides owner statements including related invoices and documentation, work order status and approval for the properties they own. Each of these portals facilitates the updating of the visitor's contact information. An EFT (electronic funds transaction) component enables payments to be made through ACH bank drafts or credit card transactions.

These advanced capabilities provide greater client access and satisfaction and lower costs by reducing office telephone traffic and clerical work. For example, providing owner statements online eliminates the often substantial and unrecognized costs of printing, sorting, stuffing envelopes and mailing.

Build the Website Yourself?

Someone must design the look of your site, create the images and write the programming code. Should you do it yourself or hire a web designer and developer? Here are a few questions to consider:

- Do you or does someone in your office have the necessary skills to design/build your site? You are looking for a flair for graphic design, the ability to create graphics, HTML and JavaScript (and possibly database) programming skills, some knowledge of how to organize information, and a familiarity with Internet technology and software. If you don't have these skills, do you have the time to acquire them?
- What is your budget? Hiring a designer and programmer will probably cost more than doing it yourself. The hourly rates of web designers range from \$50 to \$100. An entire website can easily cost thousands of dollars to create. Establish a clear idea for the appearance and structure of your site before you hire a designer.
- Do you have some skills but lack others? If so, control your costs by hiring a designer or developer to do the work that you cannot.



Here are some points to consider if you elect to use an outside web firm:

- Know what you are receiving for the price they quoted you. Insist on specific deliverables including a project plan with defined milestones.
- Will they help you with the content? Is there an extra charge for this?
- Are their web pages user-friendly? Surf other sites they have developed and make sure they are easy to navigate.
- Do they know the language of the property management world? Will you spend additional time educating them? Are they willing to learn?
- What about ongoing website maintenance? Can they provide this service or teach you how to update the website yourself?
- Review several examples of other sites they have developed. Can you find some that provide the functionality and “look” that you seek?

The Architecture of Your Website

The look and feel of your website instantly creates an impression on visitors to your site. A website should not only be attractive and professional in design but be fast loading, functional, clear in content, easy to navigate and search engine friendly.

Look for existing websites that catch your attention, are easy to get around, and have a design (layout, images, colors, etc.) that complements your business. Use those sites as examples for you or your web developer to emulate. Some points to consider:

- Be sure that each page has something of value (content) to offer.
- Make it easy to find stuff. Think through the organization of the site, minimize the number of clicks to important information, include a menu on each page including a link to the home page, limit the length of your pages to one or two full screens except for articles which should be limited to six or eight screens.
- Don't annoy visitors with pop-up windows, blinking or scrolling text, animated images, loud sounds, or amateur image backgrounds.
- Don't slow the responsiveness of your site with large images or flashy multimedia.
- Make sure it is easy to read. Use a spell checker, avoid ALL CAPS and more than one exclamation point, use at least a 12px font size or larger, use a contrasting text color, and keep the text width less than 600 pixels.

Get Feedback

Measure the impact and effectiveness of your website. Ask your residents and owners what they think,

how easy it is to use, and what they would like to see. A comment form on your site is an easy way to ask for feedback. An online survey can ask specific questions and is more likely to be completed than a phone or face-to-face survey. People are also more likely to give more honest answers.

Analyze Your Website Traffic

Another form of feedback is available through web logs, which track the activity of visitors to your site. Statistics can include the most and least visited pages, what pages visitors looked at and how much time they spent there, and how many are repeat customers. Many different web analysis software packages are available to provide these statistics. If you use a hosting service, inquire as to what information they provide as part of your hosting contract or if advanced options are available.

Should You Host Your Website?

Most businesses have a direct Internet connection through DSL or cable and could therefore host their own website. Just because you can doesn't mean you should. Your site should be accessible 24-7 and not be affected by someone at your office uploading a big file or resetting your server.

Many web hosting services can provide reliable, secure and fast Internet connection. Their hosting fees will often be less than the cost of the additional bandwidth you will need to buy from your ISP to provide acceptable performance to your visitors.


Publish, Publicize, Promote

Advertise your website on your letterhead, e-mail messages, newsletter, billboards, ads, etc. Register with the search engines, but don't overdo it. Search engine optimization (SEO) techniques work best for firms with a national presence. Most property management websites focus on their local market.

Review, Refresh, Revise

You may be tempted to sit back after implementing your website, but you can't afford to do that. Operating a successful site means updating it regularly. A website that looks the same with old listings month-after-month becomes stagnant. Change a few colors, replace a key graphic, or add the latest business news.

Keep on top of your leasing data, web analysis statistics, client feedback, and what your competitors are doing. Use this information to improve the structure of your website, as well as the services you offer.

Invest wisely in your website and it will be an indispensable tool that drives the growth and success of your business. 

Guidelines for Web Credibility

A few excerpts from the “Stanford Guidelines for Web Credibility” (www.webcredibility.org/guidelines):

Highlight the expertise in your business. Identify your affiliation with respected organizations like NARPM®.

Make it easy to contact you. Provide your phone number, physical address and e-mail address.

Stay professional. A family member or neighbor may be great to create your family webpages, but they are often not the right choice for your business.

Update your content often. Add to and freshen up your content monthly.

Avoid errors. Typos reflect on your professionalism and broken links are an instant turn-off.