



## Creating A Farm Web Site

A Web site is an important tool for your business if you sell your products directly to consumers. With each passing day, the Internet grows in importance as a source of information for people looking for locally grown food and farm products.

While your older customers know where you are because they've been coming to your farm for years, many new customers will seek out information about your farm on the Web before they commit to a visit.

At a minimum, your farm needs a good, simple Web site that is nicely laid out and features great images. It should fit the theme of your business and should use the same logo that is on your other marketing materials.

Many farms add additional features to their Web sites, like blogs, a harvest calendar, event information, and a sign-up list for e-mail alerts. Some of these more advanced features are described in the tip sheets on blogs, online stores, and permission marketing.

### What do I want my Web site to do?

Your Web site needs to convince first-time visitors to stick around long enough to find the information they are looking for. An effective site will excite customers about your farm and bring them to your stand.

Think like a customer when you design your Web site. All important information—who you are, where you are located, your hours of operation and your products—need to be on the first page or 'home page' of the site or in a clearly identified page just one click away. Make sure this essential information is easily found on your Web site—you will keep your customers around longer.

Once you have their attention you can offer them additional information about why they should buy your products. The best way to do this is through the story of your farm: what makes your farm unique? How long have you been farming? What are you best known for? Customers also enjoy having a glimpse into what you do and how you do it, seeing pictures of the seasons on your farm, or even hearing about your recent challenges. Avoid getting negative or technical. Keep it simple, upbeat, direct, and real.

### What should I avoid?

Your customers are seeking authentic products from real people. Your competitors—gourmet food shops and high-end food retailers—display their products in a classy, upscale environment.

Farm Web sites should take a cue from retailers like Whole Foods. Think Martha Stewart, not Hee-Haw.

### Features to avoid:

**Dancing vegetables, animals, and other animated gimmicks.** Your eight-year-old finds them cute. Your customers find them corny!

**A 'splash page.'** These introductory pages are often too large to load quickly, and they keep your customers away from your key information. If it takes too long to navigate your site, your customers will leave.

**Long blocks of text or long pages.** Keep customers from feeling overwhelmed by keeping things simple. It's better to have a few smaller pages than one really long one.

**A dark or complex background.** Our eyes are not getting any stronger! Busy backgrounds make it hard to focus on the information.

**Music.** Many of your customers are sneaking a peek at your site while at work and don't want to get busted by the boss! Others may not like your musical tastes. In either case, music can annoy your customers and distract them from your information.

**Poor quality, too large, or dated photos.** Pictures tell a great story, but your customers won't stick around if they take too long to load. Make sure your pictures are appropriately sized and good quality. And take new photos every year or two—hair styles change, employees move on.

### Who will create my Web site?

The first decision many businesses make is deciding whether to create a Web site themselves or hire help. Doing it yourself seems like a good idea... until you get started. Unless you are very comfortable using complex computer software, building a Web site will be very time consuming and frustrating.

Some farms rely on children, relatives or friends to build their Web site for them. More often than not these 'free' projects get bogged down. Volunteer or amateur web designers rarely have your site as a top priority and are often learning how



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to build a Web site as they go. You will probably not feel comfortable asking them to pick up the pace and your relationships might become strained.

Roxanne Austin worked to create a Web site for her farm, Austin Brothers Valley Farm in Belchertown, Massachusetts in 2007 and has this advice to offer farmers: "Start working on it in

October, not January—that's what we did and it was too late!"



### Working with consultants

If you decide to hire a consultant ask him or her to show you a portfolio of Web sites they have created. Talk to some of their previous clients. Some questions to ask are:

- Does the designer get work done on time?
- Do the designer stick to a quoted budget?
- Will the designer set a site up so the clients can update it themselves?
- Is the designer easy to reach and quick to respond to questions or problems?

Don't wait until your first meeting with a designer to start planning your site. You will save a lot of time and money if you bring an outline of your ideas, budget and expectations to the meeting. "It really helped to know what we wanted when we met with the designer," says Roxanne. "It helped us get closer to our vision, faster."

**Define your goals.** What do you want the Web site to do for your business? Do you want to attract people to the farm? Sell online? These are two different goals and require different functions and approaches to work well on the Web.

**Identify your budget.** You would not expect the cheapest and most inexperienced mechanic to do a good job fixing your tractor, but you might be tempted to go for the rock bottom price on a Web site. Why? Your Web site, if done well, will be one of your most important marketing tools. Do your best to find the person with the right experience and the best price for your Web site.

**Get it in writing.** Have a clear understanding and a written agreement with whomever you hire. Set deadlines and prices in advance.

**Stay on schedule.** Most Web site delays are caused by clients who take too long to make decisions or get information to their designer. Respond quickly to your designer's questions and get information to him or her on time.

**Learn how to use your site.** Spend time thinking like a customer and try to 'break' your Web site! It's a great way to find glitches and to see if what you thought made sense on paper makes sense once it's online. If you are planning on doing some updates yourself, learn how and practice. "It would have helped us to plan more one-on-one training with our web designer so they could show us how to make small changes to our site," says Roxanne.

### Spread the word

You can have a great Web site that no one knows about. Once your site is up and running, get its address onto everything you print—business cards, brochures, letterhead, bags, t-shirts, etc.—and make sure your e-mail address is from your farm's domain, not from a free site like Yahoo! or Juno. Many small business owners overlook this important detail. If you are paying to host a Web site you have at least 10 free e-mail accounts that come with it and that feature your domain name. Use them.

### Bringing it all together

Taken separately, Web sites, blogs, stores and e-mail newsletters are interesting activities with some potential. When they are well-integrated they can increase your sales. There are numerous examples of online businesses that are very successful at integrated online marketing and sales—and not just Amazon.com. Your blog should drive customers to your store, not just give them free entertainment. Your e-mail newsletter can tell thousands of readers that you are having a monthly sale and give them an easy path to a purchase in your online store. Your online store can offer a simple, efficient way to get a piece of the farm delivered to a customer across town or across the country. Understanding the power of these tools collectively will help you understand how to make them work for you, so you can spend more time doing the work you love.



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