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`Worship' your Net customers by building a site to behold

For Irish firms with Internet jitters, Sheila O'Kelly provides a guide to those tentative first steps into the big bad Worldwide Web

Almost half of the Republic's top businesses have not got a website and are not active in e-business. However, most of those who haven't embraced the Internet age claim they will be active within the next 12 months.

So for the tardy 48 per cent wondering how to jump on the e-commerce express, here is a guide to getting started.

The first step is to check that someone else has not already registered your business name. If your main market is likely to be the Republic, or ex-pats abroad, you will probably want to register www.yourcompanyname.ie. The letters "ie" identify the site as Irish.

Use the simple search mechanism at domainregistry.ie to check the availability of the required domain name. The Irish domain registration office at University College, Dublin handles the registration as a public service and quite strict criteria are applied to those who may be entitled to a particular domain name. All applications must specify two nameservers and this can be arranged through your Internet service provider (ISP).

The ISP may also handle the domain application for you. The registration office must be satisfied that the registrant is legitimately entitled to use the name desired.

However, registering a dot.com domain name is a bit like grabbing a bit of land back in the days of the wild, wild west and there have been modern-day duels over domain names when one company finds another has been quicker off the draw. A www.companyname.com means that a site is aimed at the international audience and nearly all US companies have "com" at the end of their website address.

If the name required is available it can be acquired online in a matter of minutes with a credit card, no questions asked. Until last July, the central registering body in the US was Network Solutions, but there are now about 100 domain name registrars accredited by the Internet Corporation for

name registrars accredited by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). Of course, there are thousands of companies offering to register your dot.com name but they must all eventually channel them through the registered bodies.

There are other endings for site names such as .org (usually nonprofit bodies); .gov (a government body); .edu (schools, universities, etc); .net (usually an ISP or another company connected with the Internet).

There are no hard and fast rules and it is nearly all a matter of custom and practice. A company which wants to use a dot.com name may settle for dot.net if its preferred choice is already assigned. It is also custom and practice which has placed www at the beginning of nearly all URLs (uniform resource locators or the website address). So to add to the confusion, some URLs will work whether or not www is inputted and some will only work without www. However, nearly all websites do have www at the beginning of the URL.

Once a name has been settled on and registered, it is time to put the site together. Designing the company website is usually a job for the professionals. However, it is important to liaise closely with the web designer and technical providers because the website must ultimately boost your business.

No amount of whiz-bang graphics will benefit the bottom line if the customer does not quickly gain access to the service or information required. Internet users' concentration spans are very low, thought to be about nine seconds, so fancy graphics can actually be the death knell of a site if they do not perform a useful function.

If yours is a business-to-customer site, before you call in the designers, analyse what are the most frequently asked questions or requested services. Make sure your website tackles these issues well and immediately staff will have more time to devote to progressing the company. In addition, clients will avoid hanging on listening to Green-sleeves and will become more satisfied customers.

Some 80 per cent of website visitors are believed to concentrate on just 20 per cent of the site. Website guru, Jakob Nielsen's useit.com site, has some practical advice on getting the best from the Internet. Patricia Seybold, who has made "worshipping the customer" into a religion, also has practical advice on her customers.com site.

So your site is up and running and it is the very model of e-commerce at its best. If you want to check that it is really up to the mark, compared to your competitors check out siteowner. bcentral.com and, in just a couple of minutes, you can compare your technical efficiency with that of your competitors. You can also compare how well search engines are picking up the computer code hidden beneath the gloss.

A customer may never find you if he or she goes to a search engine looking for your type of company, and finds that the webmaster has not inserted appropriate code so the search engine does not recognise you.

There are many specialist search engines in the Republic including Doras which has a useful ratings guide for sites - five shamrocks good, one shamrock not good. However, the day I went back to check this site the link was not working and I had to circumvent it by using the address below.

Irish search engines include: Local Ireland, which searches county-by-county; iesearch specialising in finding an e-mail address when a person's name is keyed in; Kompass, which is a comprehensive business search engine; Index Eireann is a recent arrival which is promising great things; Niceone flags itself as "Ireland's Internet directory" and also has a guide to creating your own web pages. Most of

these sites offer facilities online to register your website and its details.

In addition, there are the international ones which have become well known like Yahoo, Altavista, Ask Jeeves and Google (awarded best search engine in thenet magazine in March).

Getting the website functioning is just the beginning. Sites must be maintained and updated regularly because the technology is changing so much that a site left lying fallow sticks out a mile and is damaging to a company's status. It is important to ensure the site continues to do its job - give customers what they want and boost the bottom line.

www.domainregistry.ie

www.networksolutions.com

www.register.com

www.useit.com

www.customers.com

siteowner.bcentral.com [sic]

www.doras.ie/Doras.nsf/index/

www.local.ie

www.iesearch.ie

www.kompass.ie

www.index-eireann.com

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