Updating a Website Without Breaking the Bank

WEBSITES THAT HAVEN'T BEEN UPDATED IN MORE THAN A FEW YEARS WILL LOOK ABOUT AS CURRENT AS A 1985 YUGO GV. MAYBE THAT'S A BIT HARSH. AFTER ALL THE YUGO WAS ONE OF THE WORST CARS OF ALL TIME AND A WEBSITE THAT WAS DESIGNED IN 2005 PROBABLY USED ALL OF THE RELEVANT TECHNOLOGY.

Today's 3-year-old website technology is more like a 1995 Ford Crown Victoria with a little rust around the wheel wells: Good at the time but a little faded and out-of-date today.

One of my sites, TechByter Worldwide, discusses technology that's likely to be used in homes and small offices. Because the emphasis is on what's new, I schedule time every year to refresh the site. The changes are evolutionary most years but sometimes there's a dramatic break from the past.

The 2012 update included new typefaces. ▶

Why This Is Important

APPEARANCES DO COUNT. PEOPLE AVOID RESTAURANTS WHERE FABRIC ON THE CHAIRS IS TORN AND THE FLOORS ARE DIRTY. FEW PEOPLE WILL BE ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT SHOPPING IN A CLOTHING STORE WHERE THE WINDOW DISPLAYS ARE CLEARLY NEGLECTED. EVEN DOCTORS CAN NO LONGER GET AWAY WITH KEEPING 10-YEAR-OLD COPIES OF NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC IN THE WAITING ROOM.

I recently read about a study that says nearly one third of Internet users believe that a modern website gives the business additional credibility and that they're more likely to patronize such businesses.

Keep in mind that many potential customers learn about your business online and will have their first contact via your website. How inviting is your site?

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Windows, OS X, or Ubuntu?

All of my current production or test machines run Windows 7 or Windows 8 these days. I no longer have any computer than runs any version of Apple's OS (unless you want to count an 11-year-old laptop that works only when plugged, has a 10GB drive, a G3 processor and version 10.3 or 10.4 of the operating system). I had a G4 notebook but it died a nasty death that was no fault of mine or Apple. The Windows 7 machines that used to dual-boot with Linux now dual boot with Windows 8 except for a netbook that has Windows 7 and Ubuntu. I recently upgraded Ubuntu to version 11.10 and I'm once again impressed.

Ubuntu does have some advantages over Microsoft's and Apple's operating systems and cost isn't the only one.

Cost, though, is a big one. Neither Windows nor OS X is free. Upgrades seem to cost less with Apple's operating system but they're also more frequent so the overall cost is probably about the same.

If you knew nothing about your company, would you consider doing business with yourself based on a visit to the site?

If your website is crying out for a redesign, you probably already know it and maybe you're wondering if now is the time to drop several thousand dollars (or several tens of thousands of dollars) on a website redesign.

If you've been putting off an update because you think it will be too expensive or you can't spare the time to manage the project, there are some options you can consider to give the site a new look at a modest cost, both in dollars and in time.

Colors, Type, and Columns

COLOR PREFERENCES CHANGE AND COLORS THAT WERE LEADING-EDGE A FEW YEARS AGO MAY NOW LOOK DATED..

If the site was properly deigned in 2005 or later, it should use cascading style sheets (CSS) and this will make overall color changes easy. Reworking a site that was built earlier or any site that doesn't use CSS will be a considerably larger project and this will also be true if the CSS was badly written.

Since 2011 it's been possible to use more than the half dozen or so "safe" typefaces that designers could assume to be present on most browsers. New technology now makes hundreds of typefaces available and modifying the site's type can

bring a new, fresh look. As with color, this change depends on the presence of well written CSS code.

A site that was designed a few years ago probably assumes a maximum usable screen width of 800 pixels. Earlier sites limited the width to 640 pixels. The smallest monitors in use today are 1024 pixels wide and most are considerably wider.

Sites designed before 2005 depended on tables for structure that is provided today by CSS. If your site is still based on tables, it should be updated because tables are a significant impediment to visitors with vision problems.

Updating sites that have been created in the past half-dozen years or so will be cost effective if the site has solid underlying CSS. If not, the cost will be considerably higher and the development process will take quite a bit longer.

Lower Cost Updates

What can you add to the site or to the way you promote the site so that it will be more relevant?
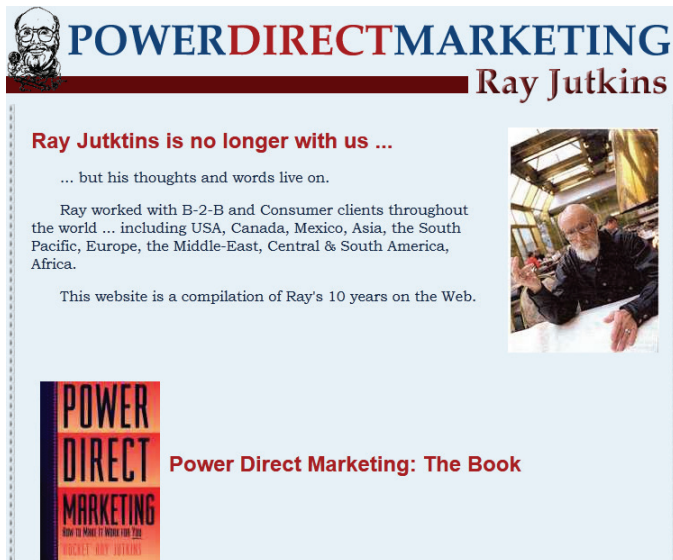
Social Media

Do you have a Facebook account? A Twitter account? Far too many people think of these resources as being useful only to people who don't have anything to do. Nothing could be further from the truth but it's important to use services such as Facebook and Twitter in ways that will be interesting to the people who are your prospects.

I know an editor who regularly posts short messages about projects she's working on, provides links to resources that will be useful for writers (her clients), and discusses the state of publishing today. She has been able to trace several clients back to these social media efforts.

Articles on most websites have a sharing option that will allow visitors to post the article to their Facebook wall or to send it to their Twitter followers. This is a great way to build awareness by sharing information your prospects can use.

But don't stop there. Add "share" buttons to your website, too. This is not a difficult or time-consuming process and it provides a way for visitors to your site to share your content with their followers. Of course, it's important to have fresh content on your site from time to time. If nothing has changed in several years, your site is by definition irrelevant.

Create New Content

You are the expert and you need to make that clear. Experts write. That's one of the reasons that they're known as experts. Adding a companion blog to your website is an easy way to update the website's content and to improve your visibility.

Relevance is key. Blog about your industry, how to solve problems related to your field, or how readers can accomplish a common task. If you don't have time or you don't like to write, hire a freelance writer and give the writer the information needed to write your blog. Just be sure to check everything for accuracy before posting it.

As with the social media, blogs require some time to develop and maintain but they're generally a good investment and involve little out-of-pocket expense.

What Can You Offer for Free?

Marketing Guru Ray Jutkins wrote a book about marketing. He sold *Power Direct Marketing* (hard cover and paperback) but he also made the entire text available for anyone to read online.

Yes, visitors could print the book, too.

When I share this story, some people are aghast but others see the genius behind the idea: People could print the book, one chapter at a time, and probably some people did. But by sharing the entire book online he was able to sell books because people who read it online recognized the value of the information it contained and bought a copy for reference — or several copies to use as gifts.

That's just the start, though. By laying out his marketing philosophy online, Ray was able to attract clients who were already sold on that philosophy. He earned new customers by making the book available.

Ray died on January 6, 2005, but a fan acquired the domain name and the text for the site; both live on today.

What can you offer for free? Whatever you offer should have an intrinsic value, something that a prospect for your product or service will recognize immediately. Sometimes the best way to make money is by giving something away.

Maybe you'll remember the words to "Desert Pete", a song that was popularized by the Kingston Trio a long time ago. This is the chorus and it applies to your website today:

You've got to prime the pump, you must have faith and believe. You've got to give of yourself 'fore you're worthy to receive. Drink all the water you can hold, wash your face, cool your feet. Leave the bottle full for others. Thank you kindly, Desert Pete.

Ideas Galore

There's no shortage of things you can do to improve your website. Some cost more than others. Some have more value than others. Some are better fits for your prospects than others.

The key point is that you have to prove your worth before anyone will be interested in doing business with you. *You've got to give of yourself 'fore you're worthy to receive.* What useful information can you offer to website visitors?

But part of that proof is creating a website that proves you're keeping up to date. A cutting-edge website from 5 years ago will appear hopelessly dated by today's standards.

If it's been more than a year or two since your most recent site refresh, think about the present and the future. What are you waiting for? Ω