The Online Success Cheat Sheet

23/03/2020

—

Alexander King
info@alexanderking.co

Overview

In the world today, a good website is a 'shop window' for any type of business. Self-employed or gig-economy workers, or people maintaining their own brand for any reason have never needed an effective online presence more.

This document is intended to be a beginner's guide to the basics of online success - how to start up a simple website and start gaining benefit from it straight away, or how to optimise what you already have so it works harder for you.

Who am I?

I've been in the world of digital and web for about 20 years, first as a programmer, then a manager, and now I'm a director at a large digital agency where I advise on online solutions for global brands and multinational companies.

What you will need

A clear idea of what you want to achieve

Maybe you have an existing business and you're looking for customers. Maybe you already have a customer base but you want to enable them to purchase online. Maybe you're a freelancer wanting to gain exposure or share your portfolio to potential employers. The solution will differ depending on what your end game looks like. Consider this, write it down and ask yourself "what does good look like?" - how will you know if your online presence is successful or not?

Tracking back to this original goal will help you make decisions on the way.

Content

Words

You need to write some words, and you need to get some pictures. There's no way around it. If you're not too hot on writing, there are online freelance copywriters just a Google away, but you don't have to be Shakespeare to get the job done yourself. Write simply and clearly and avoid jargon and buzzwords.

Typical content you will need to write or provide:

- An overview of what you or your business do

- Geographical location if it's pertinent (eg if you're a local gardener)
- Case studies/testimonials (these are very powerful, ask previous happy customers and they'll likely provide them)
- Prices - if you're happy for these to be public
- Contact information
- A blog or news section (if you think you can keep it busy, more later)

Pictures

In addition, you're going to need some images. Try to steer clear of stock images if you can as these don't speak to your individuality, and people viewing the website can spot them a mile off. Also, **do not take images from Google searches**! You will get in trouble for using copyrighted content. The owner of the image will find you, and send you a bill.

If you make things, take good quality photos (your phone is more than good enough). If you provide a service, take pictures of yourself at work. Remember - people buy from people, so the more personalised you can make your images, the more powerful they will be.

If you're not much of a photographer, why not find a local amateur/freelance one and pay them/barter with them to help you out?

Some money

Let me cut to the chase. You will need to spend money to get an online presence that is effective. One way or another, nothing is free. If you're not prepared to spend at least £10 a month on your website, you probably don't really want one. Add this cost into your company budgets if you have them, and if you can pay upfront for some of the subscriptions I'll come to, you'll likely get a discount so see if you have any free capital to start with.

At some point in your journey (maybe not now, but soon) you may need the services of a specialist or professional (designer, photographer, copywriter, programmer). Pay people what they ask, and respect them. They're probably small business owners or freelancers just like you! If you're tight on cash, why not propose an exchange of services?

Key elements for success

You're very lucky - it's 2020. Back in the olden days, when I started out, you had to know how to code from scratch to have a website, while dodging swooping pterodactyls. These days, there are many wonderful services that mean you don't need to know a line of HTML. However, the basic requirements of a good website still need to be considered.

Mobile optimisation

People view the internet more on mobile devices than they do on desktop computers, and this will become even more prevalent as time goes on. It's imperative that your website looks and behaves well on mobile phones and tablets.

Content

There's a saying - "Content is King", and it really is. You need to give people **a reason to visit your website in the first place** (information, entertainment, etc), **a reason to stay** (it's compelling or interesting) and **a reason to return** (they recognise you as an expert, you provide a service they may need now or in the future).

As with all the advice in this document, if you want to know what 'good' looks like, visit your competitors, peers or other people doing what you do, and note down what you like about it as a potential customer. On the other hand, what frustrates you? Take these lessons and apply them to your own website. *Always view your own website as one of your customers and make decisions based on that*.

Don't steal content! Not only is it not cricket, search engines will penalise you for doing so.

Be clear, concise and to the point when writing content. Make sure images are big enough to see. Avoid distracting animations and effects unless they add something to the visitor experience.

Clear navigation

It goes without saying people need to be able to quickly find the information they need. As a general rule, nothing should be more than three clicks away from the home (or landing) page. Most online content management systems put you in control of your menus and categories of information. Spend some time simplifying these, and if you get more than a couple of levels deep, really carefully consider if all that information is useful.

Also, **bear in mind that a lot of visitors will not see the homepage first**. If they come from a specific search result, they could land on any page of your website, so make sure the navigation is equally clear (and consistent) on every page.

Search Engine Optimisation

There was a time when SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) was big business. Whole companies did nothing else but try to get their clients' websites to 'number one in Google'. Nowadays, Google is a lot smarter than it used to be and works regardless of any efforts to influence or game the system.

The way Google (and all search engines) work is this: They are designed to bring back the most relevant content to a user search. The way you get to the top of the first page is by being the most relevant.

So - we're back to 'Content is King'! Your primary focus should be enough quality content on each page to place you as a trusted source of information on that topic. This is called 'organic search'.

Best practice

Having said that, there are the basics to get right. Some of these will be your responsibility if you're creating and managing your own content.

Make your title relevant

The page title appears in the top bar of your browser, and it should be relevant to both what your website is about, and the content of the page being viewed, for example: "York Gardener - Lawn services"

Structure your content logically

Much like this document, your page content should be organised into headings and paragraphs. In the world of the web, these headings go from H1 (the main page heading) through H2, H3, H4 etc. In each case, make sure the heading is pertinent to the content it precedes.

Keep your images small in file size

This might seem like an odd one, but Google really loves quick-loading pages, especially on mobile. You can do your bit to keep your website as quick as possible by making sure images you use on your pages aren't overly large in file size. 100kb is about the maximum you should use (right click and properties in Windows will tell you the size of the file before you upload it). If you want to make images smaller, free websites like http://www.imageoptimizer.net allow you to upload your large image and get a smaller one in return instantly.

Use an SSL certificate

An SSL certificate applied to your website ensures that traffic to and from it is encrypted, and this is a must-have as far as search engines (and general best practice) is concerned. Your web host or web platform provider should offer this as part of the package, and if not please enquire with them how this can be setup and maintained.

Pay-per-click advertising

If you do a Google search right now, you'll see the first results are actually marked as 'Ads' or 'Sponsored'. These are here as a result of PPC (Pay-per-click) advertising. Website owners bid for certain keywords or search terms (for example 'gardener york') and the highest bidder gets the top spot. They then pay Google a few pence for everyone who clicks that link.

This could be an option for you, but it can get expensive and you'll have to carefully consider how you will make this money back. How much can you pay for a sale and still make money? There's no guarantee that a website visitor will buy something or convert to a customer or contact, remember.

How to get it done

As I mentioned earlier, it's 2020. There are now countless online services that can provide you with a web presence for very little effort or expense. I'm going to highlight a few here, but this is not an exhaustive list. I'm not being paid by any of these companies, either (unfortunately!)

Wix (wix.com)

Wix is an online website builder tool, that provides you with an online interface for creating, designing and managing a website. You can sign up for free and give it a go if you like, but it really only gets useful for anything serious once you start paying a monthly subscription:

MOST POPULAR	

Unlimited

Entrepreneurs & Freelancers

£ **8** 50 /month

Combo

For Personal Use

£ **6** /month

UNLIMITED Bandwidth	2GB Bandwidth
10GB Storage	3GB Storage
Connect Your Domain	Connect Your Domain
Remove Wix Ads	Remove Wix Ads
Free Domain for 1 Year	Free Domain for 1 Year
1 Video Hour	30 Video Minutes
£75 Ad Vouchers	£75 Ad Vouchers
Site Booster App - $60 Value	
Visitor Analytics App - $60 Value	

Unless you're expecting a huge amount of visitors, I'd recommend the Combo pricing option. The most useful aspects of this are 'Remove Wix Ads' (because you really don't want

someone else's adverts on your professional-looking website do you?) and 'Free domain for 1 year'. Domains (for example www.website.com) can cost between £10 and £30 depending on the one you choose, so this is decent value. They will charge you an ongoing separate fee after a year, though - so determine what this will be before signing up.

Once signed up, you can either use one of Wix's many excellent pre-built templates or design it yourself. Don't worry too much about your website looking the same as someone else's if you do decide to use a template. Your content is going to be completely different, and the odds of someone else's website looking like yours and being about the same subject are extremely slim.

Wix even has an automated designer - answer a few simple questions and it will design a website for you! You kids these days, you don't even know you're born…

Squarespace (squarespace.com)

Squarespace is a little bit fancier and a little bit more professional than Wix, but this is reflected in the price and the learning curve. I'd recommend the Personal pricing option to start off with:

● **Pay Annually**

○ Pay Monthly

Personal

£10

per month

Save 23% annually

SELECT

CORE

Free Custom Domain*	✓
SSL Security	✓
Unlimited Bandwidth and Storage	✓
SEO Features for Site Visibility	✓
Templates to Fit Every Need from Blogs to Portfolios	✓
Contributors	2
Mobile Optimized Websites	✓
24/7 Customer Support	✓
Basic Website Metrics	✓
Squarespace Extensions	✓
Professional Email from Google*	
Premium Integrations and Blocks	
Complete Customization With CSS and JavaScript	

Like Wix, Squarespace includes a 'wizard' that will start you off with a template suited to your needs, ready to customise. You'll notice that they also explicitly state they're giving you an SSL certificate and mobile optimisation! It's like they read this document first, or something.

Wordpress (wordpress.com)

Apparently, Wordpress powers 36% of the internet - but it's not clear if this is the good 36% or not. Wordpress comes in two flavours - hosted by Wordpress.com themselves and Wordpress.org which is the code you can host yourself. I'm going to talk about Wordpress.com for the purposes of this document. I'd recommend the Premium plan:

Personal plan
WordPress essentials for a basic site.

£3 per month

Billed at £36 per year

Build your starter online home with basic site-editing tools, a custom domain name, and access to live chat support.

Get started

Email and live chat support ⓘ

Free Domain for One Year ⓘ

All free features ⓘ

Premium plan
Powerful tools at a great value.

MOST POPULAR

£7 per month

Billed at £84 per year

Build a sleek site with beautiful themes, robust design and monetization tools, custom CSS, and Google Analytics.

Get started

Advanced customization ⓘ

Unlimited premium themes ⓘ

All Personal features ⓘ

The reason I recommend the Premium plan is because this gives you access to Themes, which you'll almost definitely need. You'll also see there's a free domain chucked in as well.

Again, the price reflects the general quality and ease of use you can expect. Wordpress wouldn't be my first choice out of the options I've presented here, but you might want to sign up for a free trial to see how you find the interface.

Selling online

All three options I've listed above have an online shopping (ecommerce) option, either as an additional paid-for service or as part of their core product. For example, you'd need Squarespace's 'Business' package to enable online selling.

If you want to sell products on your website, all the rules about content still apply. Ensure each product has good images, a full and rich description and that your products are logically titled and categorised.

If you sell a service, the above platforms all have some version of a booking or appointment management widget, so just follow the relevant instructions.

PayPal

For taking payments online, I recommend you sign up for a PayPal account if you don't already have one. It's universally trusted by customers, it offers protection to them as purchasers and although they do take a small cut of every payment made through their system, they take away all the headaches around card processing (which is very complex and stressful, quite frankly). It's also easy to plug into any website ecommerce service so you can get up and running quickly.

Email

There are a number of ways to get a working email address, but some are definitely more hassle than others. Depending on where you bought your domain name, you might get an email service bundled in - but this will require you setting that email inbox up on any computers you want to access it on.

Another option is to use a free Gmail/Hotmail/iCloud etc email address and simply forward any mail to your domain directly to it, so for example an email to sales@mywebsite.com appears in your bobsemail@gmail.com inbox. This can be configured in the place you bought your domain name. The downside is, you're not easily able to send email **from** sales@mywebsite.com using this method.

By far the easiest solution is to create a new Gmail account for your website and use that. So if your website was bobsgardening.com you could set up bobsgardening@gmail.com and use that email address on your website/business cards etc. It's slightly less professional but few people really care, and as long as they can get in touch with you, it's doing its job.

How to keep it going

So you've set up your website, you might have your products listed and your PayPal account linked up for payments. You've got all your content right and the doors are open. What now?

If you've decided to have a blog or news section on your website, it's really important that you keep it updated. There are two reasons for this: one, search engines love websites that are frequently updated and will rank them favourably as they can see they're maintained well. Two, it looks terrible when you visit a website and the last blog entry is from April 2013! Neglect to update news or blog content, and the impression you're giving is that you may no longer be a going concern.

Even your standard content should be reviewed regularly. Is everything you've written still true, and up to date? Are you including all your latest portfolio pieces or testimonials?

Having a website is like having a goldfish. You have to keep feeding it and cleaning the tank or it will die, and you'll have to flush it down the toilet.

Monitoring your progress

You've launched your website! Congratulations, you flipping ninja you. But remember at the beginning we thought about what success would look like? Well we need to keep an eye on how our new baby is performing out there and there are numerous tools to help us do that.

At the very least, sign up for Google Search Console (https://search.google.com/search-console) and plug in your new domain name. You'll be alerted of any problems now and in the future, and you can see easy to understand graphs and data on visits, clicks and so on.

Conclusion

Having a nice looking website can be extremely useful. It can be your shop window to the world, a portal to advertise your services and achievements, and can really boost how you're perceived online. They don't have to be flashy or technical, either. The best websites are clean, simple, and speak clearly from human to human. Good luck!

FAQs

I'm not technical! Can't you just do it for me?

You don't have to be technical! You already use a computer for reading and writing emails, no doubt writing and reading documents, you might even have chucked a PowerPoint together, and you learned how to do all that just fine! I've deliberately recommended services and platforms that are targeted at 'non-technical' people, and that have support email addresses and phone numbers to give you a hand. Plus, if I do it for you, and you want to make changes later, what then? I could be living on a yacht in the Maldives with Jennifer Aniston and not returning your calls.

I got an email saying I've been hacked!

You haven't been hacked, ignore it.

I've got an email from a company saying they can get me to number one in google!

Ignore it.

What if I stop paying my subscriptions?

Any of the providers listed here will give you plenty of notice before doing so, but they will definitely turn your website off if you stop paying them.

I need something specific that I can't see in any of those providers' feature list?

You might well need something bespoke or particular, in which case these platforms might not cut it. If you need a web developer to code something specific, there are plenty of them out there, but do thoroughly investigate the available features of what you're currently using first - bespoke programming can be expensive and will require ongoing maintenance. I would say though, keep it simple. For example, If you have a product that needs a lot of configuration, it's a lot easier to just have a 'call us now' link with your phone number so you can discuss over the telephone than introduce complexity that may end up putting customers off.

You've completely missed out [insert platform here], you haven't even mentioned [incredibly important aspect here]! You n00b!

This isn't supposed to be exhaustive. This document is intended to get the layman online by themselves. However, if you've got suggestions as to how this could be improved I'd love to hear them - drop me an email!