

How to Create a Profitable Website

Your spa website is the most important marketing collateral that you develop. It should reflect your image, reinforce your brand, and convey a persuasive message. Most importantly, it should be profitable. A good website will drive salon sales, reduce your overall marketing budget and significantly improve your bottom line.

The top four objectives for a profitable website are:

1. Expand market reach
2. Generate leads
3. Acquire new customers
4. Increase sales

Beyond this, a great website will:

5. Establish a relationship with website visitors
6. Communicate with customers
7. Disseminate product and service information
8. Provide customer support
9. Improve customer loyalty
10. Reduce the overall cost of marketing

How do you accomplish these lofty goals? Start by knowing your target audience. Speak to them in their own language, and then lead them to an action you want them to take.

Knowing your target audience is extremely important to your online success. As your 24 hour marketing brochure, your website should speak to your visitors in a professional (yet personal) tone that establishes trust and credibility. Your website content should motivate readers to learn more about your products and services. Pictures add a lot to a site, but it's the

words on the page that actually sell your products and services. Keep the content relevant; use headlines with “punch”; and make pages “scannable”.

What action do you want site visitors to take? For starters, you probably want them to call and make an appointment, but there are many other responses including: print a discount coupon, place an order for a product or gift certificate, download your service menu, sign up for your salon newsletter, or bookmark your site.

Guide your visitors to an appropriate action by using persuasive marketing copy that is loaded with customer benefits. The point of your website (or any marketing message) is to increase sales by fulfilling a customer need. Use your website to inform and persuade. By clearly stating the benefits of your products and services you’ll establish trust with your audience and dispel any concerns about doing business with your salon.

Differentiate Yourself

To differentiate yourself from competitors, you need to define your unique selling proposition (UPS). Make your UPS distinctive and relevant to your customers and prospects. Clearly and succinctly define the reasons why customers will benefit from your services. What makes your salon better than the rest? Why should they do business with you? What do your clients think about you? Emphasize hard, quantifiable differentiators such as price as well as soft differentiators, such as dependability and reputation. Back up any claims with proof or references. Above all, your website should answer the following question: “What’s in it for me, the customer?”

Organization and Layout

Organize your website content so that information can be easily found. Keep the navigation structure intuitive, logical, and as simple as possible. Visitors will quickly abandon your site if the information they’re looking for is not readily found. This is especially true if you have an

ecommerce site. Don't frustrate visitors by making them click too many times for the information, or they just might click off your site.

Generating Leads and Acquiring New Customers

Your website can be a veritable marketing machine by capturing leads and customers 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Sadly, few salon websites ever achieve that goal. So, how do you go about doing this?

It can be accomplished by publishing compelling offers for products and services. Be sure to test the offer, and if it's not generating the response you desire, change it. One key advantage of internet marketing over other media is that your message can instantly be in front of a huge audience. Use your website to measure, test, and refine your marketing message. Hone the message until you get it right. Keep your promotions fresh, and you'll encourage return visits to your site.

Why encourage return visits? The answer is simple: the web is a powerful way to generate a great return on marketing investment. The cost of hosting your website for a full year will likely be less than a single ad in a local newspaper. Repeat traffic to your website means more opportunities to generate sales and interest in your services. Don't let visitors leave without asking for a little information about them.

Think about what happens if someone calls your salon asking for information. The process begins with someone dialing your number which they obtained through a yellow page listing, a referral, or some form of advertisement. They are obviously interested in your business, or they wouldn't have gone to the trouble of placing the call. Do you provide the information and end the call without asking any questions? Of course you don't. You engage in a dialogue to assess their needs, and then try to get their name and contact information for your files. Most likely, you ask them if they'd like to be on your mailing list so you can stay in contact with them.

Think of the Internet and your website as the electronic extension of this process. People are funneled to your site through search engines and directories or by directly entering your URL - quite possibly from an ad that you've placed. They are interested in obtaining information about your business. These website visitors are potential customers. Are you asking questions and trying to get information from them, or are you turning them away? Smart web marketers realize the intrinsic value of each website visitor and institute measures to collect website intelligence.

Measures You Can Take To Gather Leads

Capture contact information from your website visitors by running contests and giveaways. Another way to gain information is to post surveys. By analyzing the answers, you gain valuable information about the respondents, information that can be used to improve your business.

One common method of capturing contact information is to publish an email newsletter. If done regularly, a newsletter will allow you to stay connected with prospects and customers and will:

- Repeat your spa message to a targeted audience
- Strengthen your brand image
- Promote sales, incentives, and special offers
- Advance your credibility as an expert in your field
- Distribute news and information
- Track response rates
- Refine and evolve loyalty programs and special offers
- Announce new staff and promote their services

Fill newsletters with informative articles and tips of interest to the recipients. Refine your email list to sub-categories and interest groups. For instance, customize content and offers to appeal to specific age categories. It's unlikely that a 45 year old woman will be interested in the same content as a 16 year old girl.

Many newsletters go unread or unopened because they don't contain any real news or information. They're often just promotions and special offers in the guise of a newsletter. Don't use unethical tactics that undermine your goodwill. You can (and should) advertise your promotions, but the focus of the newsletter should be news and content. If you distribute special offers via email, get permission to do so. Include a checkbox in your newsletter signup form so users can "opt in" or "opt out". There are serious consequences if you break CAN SPAM laws.

Publish your newsletters on your website. It's a relatively painless way to build content. Once a month or once a quarter, you or your staff can write articles and post them to your website. Up-to-date, valuable content builds credibility and gives visitors a reason to return to your website and ultimately to your salon. You may even find that other websites start linking to your articles. If this happens, you'll be pleasantly surprised with a boost in search engine rank due to an increase in your website popularity.

Five Things to Avoid

1. Poorly written copy is a common problem for many salon websites. A hastily constructed, do-it-yourself site, may do more harm than good. Your website may be the first marketing collateral a prospect sees. First impressions are often lasting impressions. Make that impression, favorable and memorable. If budget constraints don't allow you to hire a professional copywriter and web designer, have someone proof the copy to ensure that it's coherent and free of errors.

2. Use keywords on your web pages. Keywords and keyword phrases are the actual words that web searchers (a.k.a. your future customers) use to find your products and services. If they aren't on your pages, web searchers will be unable to find your website. Make your website copy "search engine friendly" so users will be able to find your products and services.

3. If you're currently involved in search advertising (pay-per-click), closely monitor your advertising budget so you're not over-paying for search terms. Track your marketing return-on-investment (ROI), and make your online marketing campaign work *for* your business – *not* against it.

4. Rid your website of coding errors. An error free site has a positive impact on your website ranking, making it easier for searchers to find you. Here's a resource you can use to check your html pages: <http://www.htmlhelp.com/tools/validator/>. Type or paste your website page into the box at the top of this page and click on the "Validate It" button. In seconds, your page will be evaluated and problems pinpointed. Fix any errors; then repeat this exercise with the remaining pages on your site until no errors are found. If you work with a developer, ask him (or her) to do this.

5. Register your website with search engines and directories. They provide incoming links so "web spiders" or "crawlers" can find and index your site. Once indexed, searchers will be able to find you among the millions of pages out there.

In summary, talk to your visitors in their own language and make information easy to find. Differentiate yourself from the competition and use your website to gather leads and new customers. Think of your website as an extension of customer service, operating around the clock, supporting all your other marketing efforts. With very little work, your website will become an invaluable marketing tool, producing leads, and drawing customers into your salon.