

How to make the most out of your Practice Website

Effective Websites for Accountants

Expert knowledge means success

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Note: This publication has not been updated since it was last published. Some of the hyperlinks may have changed and may need updating. In addition, some of the information in this publication may be out of date.

Introduction

This publication is designed to help you to make the most out of your website. It is not filled with technical jargon but is structured so you can look at your own website and analyse how effective it is, or alternatively use this as a guide for building a new website for your firm.

The rise of the internet and accountancy websites

In the space of a decade, the internet and World Wide Web have changed the way we live. 89% of UK businesses are now using the internet according to a study by Eurostat, along with 70% of individuals (*full time workers; source: MORI/Mintel*)

As more and more individual and business clients use the internet to source information for themselves or their organisations, so grows the importance of this growing medium to accountancy firms.

20 years ago accountancy firms couldn't even advertise or market their services. Now they have the opportunity to open up their services to a whole new market. However, this market's expectations are changing rapidly...

The information age

Clients have learnt to think differently because of the advent of the internet – they expect information to be available on a seconds notice at their finger-tips, and will not settle for any less. The time taken to make decisions has become less and less, with clients expecting ever more from their suppliers and service providers in general. If they are not happy, they will switch to a better alternative – it's a simple as that.

Clients will therefore recognise the value of dealing with an accountancy firm who understand their needs and show this by providing them with useful information and content on their website which is available to

them 24/7.

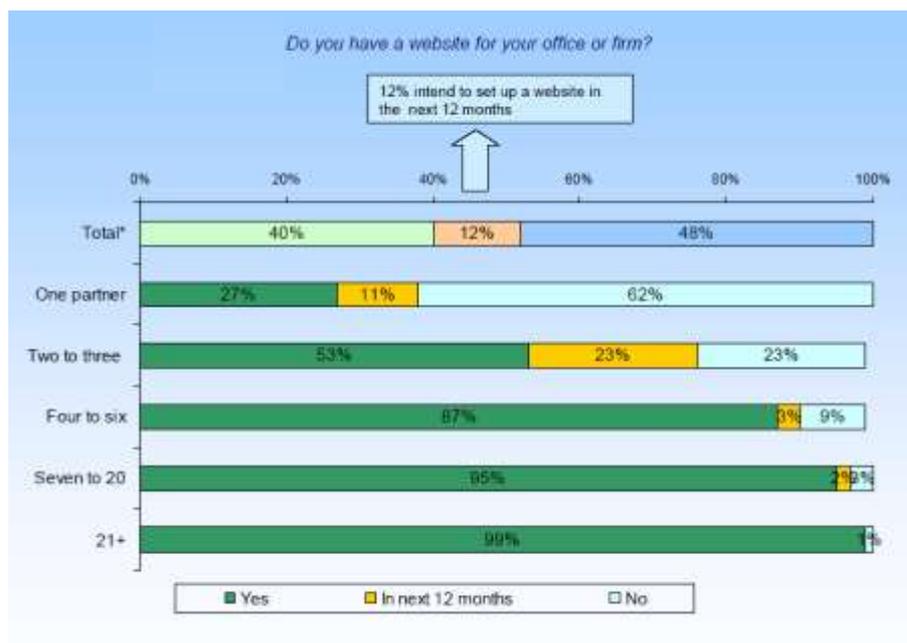
Add value to your Firm

Research has highlighted that around 70% of companies always approach their accountants first for business related advice (*Source: Sage Heartbeat Survey 2004*). So, through websites, accountants have the opportunity to extend their authoritative counsel on a wide range of topics, providing the practice with the chance to diversify while adding real value to their clients.

Accountancy firms can gain a clear marketing advantage in today's competitive environment by having a well-designed website and having an integrated eMarketing strategy. The two elements go hand in hand. For example, don't market the fact that you are a great accountancy firm and compete with every accountancy firm in your area. Instead, market your unique selling points, such as specialist services, vertical markets or distinct geographic area.

The current situation

According to research carried out in 2004, 40% of accountancy firms have their own website. However, sole practitioners trail behind other sizes of practice, with only 27% reporting they have a website (and only another 11% intending to have one in the next 12 months). This is compared to the 95% of 7+ Partner firms that have websites. See graph below for more details.



(Source: ICAEW Report: IT in Accountancy Practices October 2004)

Sole practitioners and 2-3 partner practices are also the least likely to feel that their websites add value to their firm. This is presumably because a majority of these are just 'brochure sites', failing to interact with visitors and keep them returning.

Just building a website and expecting visitors to come is outdated; it no longer rings true in today's fast paced economy.

Why do you need a website?

Savvy accountants know that much of their new business comes from recommendation. True, direct marketing, advertising and other practice development methods can result in new clients. But, perhaps the quality of new business obtained by such marketing methods is not as good as a new client obtained on the back of an existing client recommending your firm's services and saying how great you are.

The reason that recommendation has worked so well for accountants in getting new business is quite simple. There is something psychologically compelling in having someone else recommend you and advocating your services. It is much more persuasive than you or your marketing company ringing up a perspective client and doing the same.

Returning to the question 'why do you need a website?'... the answer is also quite simple and inextricably linked to why referral systems work so well: **People like drawing their own conclusions.** They don't like to be coerced by sales material – no-one likes to think they've been sold to (which in some people's mind tantamount to being 'had'). They like to look at the information available from their own insights and that of valued advisors (such as trusted acquaintances) in their own time and draw their own conclusions.

If you have a website that has worthwhile content it can be a powerful marketing tool for your practice. Prospects can look you up

at any time of the day or night, find out what you have to offer and make a decision – your website really is acting as your 'shop window'. The best outcome is that they make contact with you and say they are interested in talking to you about a need they have or a problem they want solved. It is really powerful that they have made the first move and so much better than you trying to sell to them. It is the subtlety of it all and the psychological contract that makes it much more likely that you will get new business if you have a website that is worthwhile.

Visitor and client expectations

Most accountancy clients expect a bit more than just a map to the office and a section on the Partners – they want to be shown that your firm is forward thinking and progressive, and this is revealed through what is sometimes the first (and only) impression of your Practice – your website.

A client's standard expectations of an accountancy firm's website will be an easy to navigate and professional-looking site with all the information about the firm they need. However, Practice attributes such as progressiveness and willingness to go that extra mile for clients can be shown through the addition of value-adding resources to a website for clients and visitors to use, including items such as business information, tax dates and calculators.

Watch out for the competition

The competition must also be taken into account – what are they offering that you are not? If a potential new client is searching the internet for a new accountant, will they pick you? If your website contains nothing but a telephone number and address, I would think not. Make sure the first impression you create is a good one, and that the potential client will feel you are the sort of firm they'd like to work with.

The internet also makes it easier for existing and potential clients to evaluate alternatives by comparing firms to one another. And how do they do this? Through looking at their websites... How does yours measure up?

2005 – The biggest year of Web growth to date

The worldwide web grew by more than 17 million sites between January 2005 and October 2005, according to survey results from Netcraft, an Internet Services Company. This figure exceeds the growth during the dotcom boom of 2000, where figures reached 16 million sites for the year.

The October 2005 survey found 74.4 million web addresses. Ten years ago, the survey found 18,957 web addresses. Web growth is recorded on a monthly basis by Netcraft. For the latest figures, visit www.netcraft.com

What makes a good website?

There is a seemingly endless list of answers available to this question, but there are certain integral features of a site that make up the quality and ‘feel’ of the site, and the general user experience.

These are design (encompassing layout and navigation) and content. So, in basic terms, a website should be both ‘usable’ and ‘useful’.

Design includes the appearance and consistency of the site, how good the navigation and ‘user-friendliness’ is, and also design features such as use of images.

Content covers the basic information all websites should include, such as contact details, information about the owner of the website (e.g. the Firm and Partners), and reasons to stay on the site – resources to interest a visitor and encourage them to both remain on the site as well as return in the future.

These two aspects of design and content combine to create the overall website ‘experience’, and you can, from the checklist below, work out both how well the information in your website is presented as well as if the information you have included is enough to satisfy your website visitor.

When using the checklist and analysing your site, do it from the visitor’s viewpoint, almost like you’re seeing it for the first time.

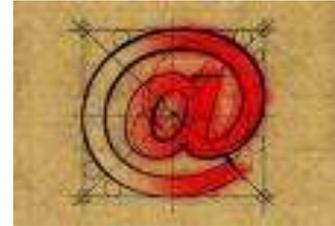
N.B. The following is not meant to be fully comprehensive, but more of a selection of the most important factors to be taken into account when analysing an existing or building a new website. Accessibility and search engine optimisation are not covered by this publication.

Design, Layout and Navigation

Introduction

With this part of the publication you will be able to judge how well the individual pages of your website are designed, as well as how the website works together as a whole to provide a good user ‘experience’. Is it easy for a visitor to find the information they want? Ask yourself – how easy is it to find a particular piece of information on the site? Is the content well-organised and under the most relevant headings? Is it easy, at first glance, to work out how the site is organised?

This will also be useful for those designing their own website, to make sure it looks professional and has a logical structure so visitors can easily find their way round.



Design and layout checklist

1. Appearance
2. Consistency of site
3. User-friendliness

This section will show you how to assess how well the information on your website is presented, as well as how effective individual pages are.

1. Appearance

Overall look and feel

- Does your homepage, and the rest of your site, look professional?
- How your site looks at first glance will influence a visitor’s perception of your firm... Does your website create a good first impression? Does it visually represent what you want to convey about your firm? Take into account visitors will enter your site at other places than your homepage (as they might have found your site through a search engine for example).
- Make sure your website doesn’t convey the wrong message about your Firm by looking ‘dated’ (which is turn looks unprofessional and amateurish).
- Colour scheme, images and fonts used often make the difference between a dated and professional-looking website.
- To assess whether your website looks dated, a good strategy is to look at a number of good quality competitor websites and compare yours to these (but make sure you look at quite a wide range).

Colour scheme

- Although you can use colour to make pages more attractive, be wary of overdoing things. You can often achieve a very effective design with just black, white and one or two other colours. Try to use a consistent colour scheme throughout the site.
- Make sure your website colour scheme 'fits' with your logo.
- Try to stick to what are called 'Web Safe' colours. This is a range of 216 colours that are virtually guaranteed to look the same on all computers.
- Make sure that visitors can distinguish between links and normal text, and that this is consistent throughout the site.

Images

- Take care with images - make sure they are relevant and add something to the site (rather than just using them because you feel you have to).
- Do not let them conflict with your brand identity and the message you wish to convey to visitors about your firm.
- Make sure your firm's logo is on every page, preferably at the top left of the screen.
- The resolution of any image used should be no more than 72 dots per inch (dpi).
- Make sure no images are 'missing' (this will be shown by a box with a red cross where the image should appear) - this can happen when images are moved to different files on your site.
- Images should all have an 'alt tag', which is basically text to explain what the image is - this helps the visually impaired as well as those who cannot view your images for any reason.

Fonts

- These should be easy to read (for sections of text, it is best to stick to familiar, common fonts) and consistent throughout the site. Verdana, for example, is a good font to use for websites.

Links

- Make sure there are no broken links (which link to the wrong page, or no page at all).
- Links should be distinguishable from the rest of the text (e.g. underlined) so visitors know they can click on them.

Page layout

- Use a simple design and have an 'uncluttered' page layout so information is easier to find and assess.
- Make use of 'white space' (blank areas on a page where text and illustrations

do not appear) which can enhance the appearance of the page layout and make information easier to find.

- Make sure that pages are not too long, so not much scrolling is required.

Conformity

- Use a standard layout similar to most other sites (but don't presume this means making your website look boring!). Most users are accustomed to the conventions of web page layout and can be confused and irritated by layouts that don't conform to what they expect. Most sites have a logo at the top of the page, with a menu bar either along the top or down one side of the page.
- Make sure nothing is confusing to visitors on the site - test this with as many people as possible, be it friends or colleagues.

2. Consistency of site

It is best to maintain a consistent layout throughout the site so that a visitor knows where things are likely to be on each page without having to think about it.

- Have a consistent user interface/standard format - menu bar in same place on all pages; consistent layout, colours, fonts and branding throughout the site.

3. User-friendliness

- Fast webpage loading speed (page download time).
- Printer-friendly pages - make sure you can print your site's pages, and no information is missing on the print-off.
- Site map or search facility for ease of finding information.



Navigation checklist

1. Menu Bar Headings
2. Navigation

This section will show you how to assess how the site works together as a whole, as well as the 'flow' (how easy it is for visitors to find the information they need as they move from page to page).

When a user views a site, it should be obvious what it offers and they should be able to easily find what they're interested in. If possible, a user should never be more than two clicks away from what they need.

1. Menu Bar Headings

This is an important feature to look at from the users' perspective, as the heading names on your menu bar will obviously have meaning for you, but not necessarily for outside visitors. Make sure the options given are unambiguous, user-friendly and functional.

- Names of headings – it is clear what each heading refers to?
- Items under headings (if necessary) – make sure you have relevant dropdown subheadings.
- Have an obvious order of headings – e.g. Home; About Us; Services; Resources; Contact Us.

2. Navigation

Not only does the site need to have content that the visitor wants, but the visitor must be able to locate this content on your site.

- Ask yourself: Is it obvious where to go to find the information that you need? How easy is it to find the information you want? It is best for other people such as friends, colleagues or even clients to test this for you, as you could be too close to the site (metaphorically speaking) to be subjective.
- On your website it should be possible to be able to get back to homepage and view the main menu from anywhere in site.
- There should be some sort of site map or search facility if you site is larger than a few pages.
- It must be obvious where you are anywhere on the site, so visitors can't get 'lost'. This can be achieved by a consistent and clear structure – for example having the menu bar in the same place on all pages. The site needs to be well organised and for the structure to 'make sense'.

Content

Content is King!

A good website will have interesting and relevant content which will encourage visitors to stay longer on the site and attract them back time and again. Visitors will expect basic information about the firm, as well as value-adding information (resources).

However, it is through value-adding resources that firms can really shine and show visitors they are a progressive and forward-thinking practice, willing to go that extra mile.

These resources will not only position a firm in this light, they will also hopefully have the interactivity that will encourage visitors to explore the site and return in the future.

A website that keeps the visitors returning is termed a 'sticky' website, and it entails extra work to make a website 'sticky', because one of the items required to bring users back is fresh, up-to-date content. However, if your goal is to have your potential customers coming back again and again then the extra work is worth it.

But time is money...

The idea of continually updating content can seem a bit time-consuming and daunting, especially when you take into account that clients trust you and will expect the information on your website to be true and correct.

However, it needn't be hard work, or actually involve any work on your part. Bizezia, for example, supplies accountancy firms with a number of website resources which are maintained and updated by their technical team.



Content checklist

1. Basic information
2. Resources

This section will show you how best to populate and organise your site, to enhance the visitor's experience and add real value to your Firm's website (and ultimately your clients).

1. Basic information

Menu Bar Headings

Examples of headings which are present on most Practice websites are:

- Homepage
- About Us (including history/philosophy of the firm and details about the Partners or team members)
- Our Services ('what we do')
- Contact Us (contact information page – map and directions, along with full address and contact details, enquiry form – this should be accessible from any page)

Make sure there are no 'ambiguous' or confusing headings which the visitor will not understand where they will lead.

Basic information should be:

1. Well written and easy to understand
2. Well-presented
3. Grammatically correct with no spelling errors
4. Concise but detailed enough to convey all the relevant information
5. Accurate
6. Up-to-date

And last but certainly not least...

7. Personal: This basic information is available on any Firm's standard website, but you can really make yourself stand out from the crowd and inject some life into the information you are conveying by your use of language, the information you choose to include (like detailed information on Partners like their hobbies), and images (like the pictures you choose to include of your Partners) – try to be creative but make sure you don't go too far! It all depends on how you wish to position your Firm – for example as innovative or old-fashioned. Just remember that the way your basic information is 'personalised' can show a lot about you.

Extra information to include on your site

- Terms of use/disclaimer/copyright
- If you are a member of a professional body or network
- Frequently Asked Questions
- Recruitment information

2. Resources

Resource categories

1. Resources to attract visitors back to your site – this will include a new and regular flow of information, for example a monthly newsletter
2. Resources designed to encourage visitors to stay on and explore the site, which is interesting, up-to-date and relevant – this 'sticky' content should engage visitors, and can be content such as interactive online calculators or business information publications

Examples of resources

- Fact sheets/tax or business publications for clients
- Regular newsletter (monthly/quarterly)
- Online calculators
- Important tax dates
- News (firm's and wider news)
- Useful links

Quality of information

- Ensure your website has good quality, clear, useful, relevant information.
- Make sure the information is well organised and easy to find.
- Check your resources are up-to-date – there is no point in having resources if they supply the wrong information by being out-of-date. This will do more harm than good, and possibly damage the credibility of not just your website but the Practice as well (and at the very least discourage visitors from returning).

As mentioned earlier, around 70% of companies always approach their accountants first for business related advice. So make sure you make the most of this opportunity to increase your revenue by making the most of your website. Through the provision of useful resources you will have the opportunity to extend your authoritative counsel on a wide range of topics, providing you with the chance to diversify while adding real value to your clients.

The importance of good website design

Your website is your shop window – people will judge your Firm from its appearance, and make numerous assumptions based on the information made available to them.

Test it out for yourself!

Visit a Firm's website that is dated, and only contains 'old' information such as the Budget Report 2002 and look at it from a viewer's perspective...

Viewers will make immediate assumptions about the Firm and its ideology, for example: If the website is dated, the assumption will be that the Firm doesn't take pride in their work; If information is out-of-date, the client might question 'how will they deal with me if they can't even take care of their own website? Will I get the level of service I need? Will they make the same sort of mistakes with the advice they give me or with my tax return?'. Potential clients could begin to doubt the competency or motivation of the Firm based on these first impressions, and search for a more suitable alternative.

It is with value-adding resources that you can really make sure the quality of your Practice is reflected by the quality of your website!

Then look at a competitor Firm's website that looks neat and professional, has all the basic information they require such as contact, Practice and Partner details, as well as going that step further and having useful value-adding resources. A positive image will have been built in the visitors' mind, and this Firm will be viewed as willing to go that extra mile for their clients; being proactive and forward-thinking, and really taking an interest in their clients' needs.

All this information will be inferred from a few seconds looking at the site.

Therefore, it extremely important to get it right - and this doesn't just apply to the first impressions of potential new clients. The same applies to existing clients. They need reassurance that they are getting the best service around, and if they are aware from acquaintances that other Firms are offering 'more', they might feel they are missing out – are you giving them all you can?

Or more importantly, are you giving the IMPRESSION you are giving them all you can?

Clients are expecting more and more, and your competitors are more than willing to provide the extra 'added value' they desire. This is especially important for firms offering business advice to take into account because out-of-date information or even a lack of information on a website can seriously hinder the way they are viewed by potential and existing clients.

Project a positive image

You can create a positive image of your Firm for both existing and potential clients through your website by:

- Making sure your website looks professional, is consistent, and easy to navigate.
- Including the obvious basic information to describe and position your Firm.
- Incorporating value-adding resources to encourage visitors to explore your site and revisit in the future.

Further Information

This guide is for general interest - it is always essential to take advice on specific issues.

We believe that the facts are correct as at the date of publication, but there may be certain errors and omissions for which we cannot be responsible.

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