



Buying IT

1. What Website?

The process of creating a web presence should start with you asking yourself what do I want the site to do and how much time do I have to keep it up to date?

Once you have a plan of what you want it to do, you will need to develop an idea of the information (content) that is going to appear on the website.

If you simply want to advertise your goods and services ask yourself if it really necessary to have your own website – could you not simply advertise yourselves through other people (online directory)?

2. Your Website Name

Your URL (Universal Resource Locator – your web address – www.) needs to be purchased. Typically this is a part of the website hosting package (where your website pages will actually be stored). The URL needs to be renewed otherwise it will be lost, typically annually or biennially.

Your hosting company will organise your URL. Your hosting company is not the same as your ISP, your ISP provides you with access to the web (via your router or modem) whilst the hosting company stores your website and allows others to access it through the web. Some do offer both services but typically separate organisations are used, your web designer should organise your hosting package, e-mail addresses and URL, but make sure all registrations belong to you.

Choose a URL that reflects your organisation's name and is not too long, as this forms a part of your e-mail address.

3. Website Design

Websites come in many shapes and sizes and should be governed by your needs. Decide what makes a good website and look for examples on the web.

Accessibility is an issue and will need to be considered at the design stage.

How flexible the site is for change and what features you will need, have a bearing on what type of website system needs to be employed.

Websites need to be updated regularly either with content or the whole look and feel. This has a financial burden as either your staff need to be able to do it or you need to buy in the services.

4. The DIY website

Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and hosting packages allow DIY websites to be created from templates, these are functional but can be limited in respect of control and services available within the website itself.

These can be created quickly and easily by non-specialist staff, they are also easy to change in terms of textual content and colour scheme but not in layout.

Template based website systems rarely include accessibility options.

5. Flat Website

Typically anyone from the amateur back street web-designer to a professional design company can provide a “flat website”.

Typically a 5 page flat website will cost between £500 and £1000, depending on what features and the design input into the site, amateurs charge as little as £50.

Flat websites need to use specialist software to manage and update the text (content), this has a training and/or on-going support overhead. Major changes (in layout) require extensive re-working of the code (the computer language the site is written in). Staff either need training, which needs to be quite extensive, or an ongoing contract with the designer needs to be negotiated.

Many flat websites use HTML (Hypertext Markup Language), Flash and Java as languages. Complex websites that interface with databases use other languages such as PHP, ASP and Perl. Ask your designer what language will be used and what your choices are. Always obtain a copy of your website code from your designer.

Complex features such as shopping, private areas, databases and fora can be made a part of such websites. The more features, the more the cost increases, as it is a result of more specialist work. Tasks such as publishing text documents (uploading) to the site or adding new images can be complex.

Flat websites can look professional and are more flexible than template driven DIY sites but do involve a longer term commitment to their upkeep and management.

Organisations such as Business Link can offer grants for groups seeking website design.



6. Content Managed Websites

Content managed websites enable non IT experts to change and maintain a website without the need to learn specialist and complex software packages such as DeamWeaver.

They cost more to set up in the first place (£2 - £2,500) but are more flexible than a flat website.

Once the “look and feel” has been agreed the content, additional pages, pictures and even other features such as new forums can be easily added.

Careful planning is required at the inception of the website to allow for expansion.

Most content management systems are modular and will allow the web designer to add extra features easily. Ask your designer what additional features are available, e.g. Blogs, Shopping carts, Chat, language modules, etc. Modules are updated and added regularly, knowing which system is being used (e.g. Drupal, Plone, Joomla, Xoop, Word Press) can help you to keep the features of your website updated regularly.

Choose a system that has plenty of other designers that subscribe to it so that an element of choice is maintained.

7. Web Designers

As with any work that you engage in, be it a person or organisation, make sure that you receive written references and gain evidence of their work.

Web Designers are notorious for over running deadlines, make it clear and a part of any contract the milestones and completion dates for their work.

A website can be a major investment in terms of time as well as cash so careful planning and consideration is required. Make sure from the start you know which features you require for your site (a specification) and how the final site will be tested prior to completion, if possible get a third party to test the site.

8. Search Engines

Where your website appears in the list of results of a search using Google is important and is termed website “optimisation”, this is where you need to pay for the services of a professional and competent website designer to make sure that your site is as close to the top of any list as possible. Ask your designer how they intend to optimise your site.

9. Blogs, Chat Rooms, Fora and Bulletin Boards

These features can allow people from outside of your organisation to add content to your website.

You need to be aware that your organisation is responsible for *any* content on its website, therefore a view needs to be taken as to who can enter text, how it is vetted (if at all) and who manages it. These views need to be addressed before the site goes live.