

How to Build a Great Small Farm Website

Make your farm and farm-related businesses more accessible—check out these tips for building a website for your farm.

by Sue Weaver

A good sales website presents your message to the world, 24 hours a day, 365 days (and nights) a week. A website costs little to establish and maintain, in know-how, time and money.

With a few nights of computer classes at your public school or library under your belt or a good book or two about Web development at hand, you can build a farm business website to be proud of.

Here are some things to consider:

Decide What Your Website is About

Websites exist for one or more of three purposes: to sell something, to inform, or to increase name recognition; good farm websites incorporate all three. It's especially important to include educational content on a farm-related website—and to update it frequently—so visitors look forward to coming back again.

For a good example of what we mean, visit Jack and Anita Mauldin's Boar Goat website.

Write Good Sales Copy

To learn how, invest in a rural enterprise marketing book or two like Ellie Winslow's *Marketing Farm Products: And How to Thrive Beyond the Sidewalk* and *Growing Your Rural Business from the Inside Out*.

Or, download a free copy of Jennifer-Clair V. Klotz's full-length United States Department of Agriculture Agricultural Marketing Service publication, *How to Direct-Market Farm Products on the Internet* (it's a huge file but worth the wait).

Choose a Worthy Hosting Service

Don't submit to the temptation to use freebie hosting! Visitors despise the advertising banners and annoying pop-ups that are part and parcel of free Web hosting and the pages they generate sometimes freeze older computers.

Did You Know?

American City Business Journals, the nation's largest publisher of metropolitan business newspapers, says that small- to medium-size businesses that utilize websites have grown 46% faster than those that don't.

According to January 1, 2009 figures provided by Internet World Stats, almost 247 million North Americans representing 36.7% of the total population of the United States and Canada have fulltime Internet access. This represents a growth of 128.3% between January 1, 2000 and the close of 2008.

Nielsen Net Ratings compiled in 2005 state that the average Internet user visits 59 separate websites per month, viewing 1050 pages. He or she allocates only 45 seconds for each page to load and spends about 25 hours per month online. Furthermore, freebie sites equate with cumbersome Web addresses. Which will your customer remember: www.freewebs/~freesites/WorldsBestBison.html or www.WorldsBestBison.com?

Select a Great Domain

Providing you don't use freebie hosting service, your domain name is your Internet address.

Make it short, catchy, and memorable. Let's say you raise Babydoll Southdown sheep. TeddybearFaces, CutestSheep, and SouthdownSweeties are all still available as .com domains tonight.

SweetSheep.com, however, is already taken—but you could still register SweetSheep.net, SweetSheep.info, SweetSheep.biz, or SweetSheep.us if you like.

Or, personalize an already-taken address with dashes (Sweet-Sheep.com), underscores (Sweet_Sheep.com), numbers (SweetSheep1.com), or additional words (MySweetSheep.com).

Lose the Bells and Whistles

Farm marketing guru, Ellie Winslow, says "If the website is for business, don't distract your visitor and don't wear him or her out with moving icons, streaming banners and other technically advanced stuff that doesn't actually promote your marketing goals."

According to How to Direct-Market Farm Products on the Internet, 75% of website visitors expect high-quality content, while 66% value ease of use; 58 % won't revisit slow-loading websites and 54% avoid dated sites; and only 12% visit to view cutting edge technology.

Watch Those Loading Times

Savvy Web designers recommend single page downloads no greater than 180 Kb. This precludes large numbers of images, high-resolution photos, and techie frou-frou.

Instead, use 72 pixels per inch thumbnail photos linked to large, glorious versions, each on a stand-alone page (and always choose good photos if you use them).

Avoid Highly-patterned Backgrounds

They tire visitors' eyes and copy gets lost in the morass.

Strive for clear contrast between font and background colors. Again, don't give your visitors eyestrain.

Nix Frames

Sites that use frames are frequently cluttered, confusing, and they rarely print out well. They load poorly in some browsers and on many computers, overfilling the screen and sometimes blocking access to a site's best features.

Chose Fonts with Care

If in doubt, use everybody-has-'em fonts like Ariel or Times New Roman.

Include the Basics on Every Page

Because search engine users don't necessarily enter at the beginning, place contact information and your business logo on every page, along with a link to your site map or home page.

Triple-check for Typos and Misspellings

Don't make visitors grit their teeth.

About the Author: Sue Weaver is an HF contributing editor and hobby farmer in Arkansas.

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