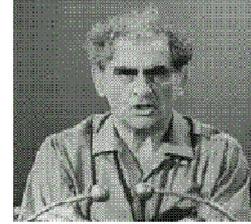


Websites - Why Is It So?

The latest ABS statistics claim 81.3% of businesses in Australia have internet access yet less than 30% of accounting firms in Victoria have a website. This prompts the question made famous by the late Professor Julius Sumner Miller, "Why is it so?"



Clearly a lot of accounting firms don't recognise the importance of a website. I estimate that 75% of Victorian accountants' websites are just electronic billboards that simply list the 'who, what and where'. This suggests accountants don't understand the primary purpose of a website - to generate new business leads.



Referrals remain the most important source of growth for accountants, however, a 2009 survey of more than 200 buyers responsible for purchasing more than \$1.7 billion in professional services suggest that a web based marketing strategy has never been more important. The HubSpot chart confirms the fact that 3 of the top 10 ways clients now find and learn about you are online. Ignore this trend at your peril.

You can only make a first impression once with a prospective new client and increasingly your website will be the first thing people 'meet'. An amateurish website or no website at all is not the type of impression you want to make with a potential new business client or employee. What do the 70% of firms without a website say when clients ask, "Do you have a website?" or "Can I check you out on the net?" You can only tell them, "It's under construction" for so long.

If your ageing client base needs an injection of younger clients, you can't afford to be without a website. It should sell your services to potential clients and also offer benefits to existing clients. It can tell people who you are, what you offer and most importantly, why you should be their accountant. Available 24/7, highly visible and accessible it gives you the opportunity to present your firm and the services you offer in the most positive light. It needs to be more than just a billboard and should 'talk' to your niche markets with relevant, quality content.

Given the current shortage of accounting staff, your website also needs to double as a recruitment tool. The traditional employment ad is of limited benefit in today's competitive environment and without a website you have virtually no chance of attracting the best Generation X and Y candidates. Before they apply for an advertised position they will 'Google' you and thoroughly review your website. Make no mistake, staff and partner profiles are important and they will check the careers section to see if you offer ongoing training and staff incentives. Your website must appeal to this demographic, send the right message, sell career benefits and be up to date.

To illustrate the pulling power of websites let's look at a case study of one of my top clients, Linda McGowan. She is a sole practitioner based in inner city Brunswick and in the past 12 months her website (www.lindamcgowan.com.au) has generated more than \$100k in new fees. Fact. As her website gained traction with her various niche markets she decided to add more niches. Given her husband plays in a band we wrote some content that targets musicians and artists. To date this has already generated more than \$28,000 of new fees and while musicians may not be your cup of tea, it proves niche markets and websites work. I really struggle to understand why some firms continue to build billboards and others are simply in denial and think websites are a waste of time and money.

Content is king and if you produce great content, clients will come to you. Produce great service and your clients will share your story and refer new clients. Creating a content rich website from scratch

that targets niche markets can be a lengthy process. There is no silver marketing bullet for accountants that guarantees you \$20k, \$50k or \$100k in new business every year but without a website you are not in the game. So many firms look for a quick fix and buy a website 'off the shelf' that contains nothing but a series of outbound links to the ATO website. Let me tell you, your clients don't want to read content from the Tax Office website. Being 'outbound links' they don't help your search engine ranking and these websites don't attract prospects. You end up looking just like the other hundred firms using the same template when your website strategy should be to differentiate yourself in a crowded market.

To be blunt, if your current website isn't driving new business then it's time for a new website. Rome wasn't built in a day and your website will always be a work in progress but as it generates more new business you can invest in some additional features. For example, Linda has bolted on a client log in area and she recently added some of our downloadable e-booklets and e-brochures to her site. She is now exploring some new technology around her niche markets and has added a blog and some social media links in the near future.



Of course, once your website does its job and generates leads and enquiries from prospects you need to 'convert' them to clients. I spend a lot of time coaching accountants through this process but that is a topic for another day. The point is, building a great website is not enough. You also need to look at some search engine optimisation (SEO) to make sure you get found by the search engines. If you Google 'musician accountant' or 'accountant musicians' you'll find Linda's website is at the top of the rankings. SEO is a strange science but your first task is to identify your niche areas and develop quality content that embeds keywords and phrases. From there you can build inbound links from dozens of other websites (Hotfrog, True Local etc.) that will lift your search engine rankings.

A lot of practitioners are looking to buy fees as part of their growth strategy and I can assure you that vendors are checking buyer's online credentials. If they find a billboard (or no website) you certainly don't enhance your chances. Don't get me wrong, there is nothing wrong with buying fees but if you have no marketing plan or strategy all roads lead to nowhere. My advice for practitioners in buying mode is make sure you invest in your own practice before you invest in someone else's. We have helped dozens of firms in the past 6 months create a 15-20 page marketing plan that covers everything from branding, logo and slogan through to niche markets, websites, brochures and referral programs. All you need to do is pick up the phone.