

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ONLINE

Building a Website, Building Your Client Base

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It's no secret that the Internet is a useful tool for selling products and communicating information. The financial downturn of the past three years notwithstanding, millions of people spend millions of hours per year on the net, looking for advice, information and solutions to their financial problems. If you don't have a website, you could be losing thousands of dollars in revenue each year.

Think about this scenario: Mrs. Jones, a middle-aged woman nearing retirement, wakes up in the middle of the night after having a vivid nightmare in which she spends her last days in poverty. Unable to get back to sleep, she turns on her computer and idly searches for information on estate planning and financial advising for the Baby Boom generation. Whose website will she visit, yours or your competition's?

Without a web presence, your financial services may as well not exist. With children learning about the Internet before they begin elementary school, senior citizens becoming the fastest-growing group of Internet users, and everyone in between using their computers to access information on every subject, why *wouldn't* you go online?

Dinosaurs, Luddites and Other Relics

Yes, Internet and computer technology can be scary. It's fast, complicated and potentially expensive. However, it's also becoming the world standard for communication and commerce, which means that if you don't jump on board, you'll be left behind.

Dinosaurs, experienced businesspeople who claim to be "too old" to learn how to use a computer, may as well retire early—if they don't learn the value of Internet tools, their businesses will die out as their clients pass on. Similarly, Luddites, persons who claim to "hate" technology, will find themselves hard pressed to find new clients if they refuse to embrace new technology.

Prospective clients want to gather information about your services before speaking with you, and if you don't have a website, how will they complete their research? Do you really want to be perceived as a dinosaur or other relic of the "paper" world?

Forms, Libraries and Other Advantages

It's a simple fact that when looking for any kind of advisor, whether it be financial, legal, medical or insurance-related, most people turn to the Internet. While building a

website enables you to reach these clients, you'll need to keep them. A few simple tools can help:

- **Paperless electronic forms:** Your clients won't have to make unnecessary office visits and you won't have to wait for the postal carrier or waste money on stamps if you offer necessary forms and paperwork online. Your clients will return to your website as they realize you offer tax, estate, insurance and other forms, available to download free and without commitment. Sites like AnnuityNetAdvisor.com (www.annuitynetadvisor.com) specialize in providing clients and advisors with paperless forms.
- **Content library:** Offering a library of fresh, well-written content serves two purposes—it helps your clients educate themselves, and it keeps your clients coming back for more. Focus on industry-specific information tailored to your clients' needs. Whether you write the articles yourself, hire freelancers to do it or purchase syndicated content, you'll need to update your website regularly if you want to keep your clients happy and educated.
- **Market data:** You might also consider providing real-time market data to your clients, either instead of or in addition to your content offering. Companies such as PCQuote (www.pcquote.com) and Standard & Poor's Comstock (www.spcomstock.com) can help you provide direct links from your website.
- **Financial tools:** The most useful and often-visited websites offer real tools their clients can use, such as budgeting tools, debt-consolidation calculators, retirement and college planning spreadsheets and more. Kiplinger (www.kiplinger.com/tools) offers some excellent tools, many of which can be implemented on even a simple website.

For more ideas about what works online, check out your competition. A good place to start is Google (www.google.com), one of the better online search engines. Type in "financial planning," "estate planning" or "insurance advisors" and see what your search yields. Note the websites you find most appealing and keep a record of what features and tools seem most appealing to you.

Where to Begin?

If you don't happen to have a degree in computer science or engineering, you can still build and maintain your own website—without having to learn HTML, XML or other strange, acronymic software programs.

If you don't want to hand over big bucks to a specialized web design firm, try one of the many services that specialize in helping advisors develop an online presence. Advisor Products, Inc. (www.advisorproducts.com) offers an initial template setup for as little as \$250, syndicated content packages and email newsletter software. SAS Insurance Technology (www.sas-it.com) specializes in offering simple solutions for advisors and insurance agents.

Many companies will, for an additional fee, teach you how to update your content and maintain your website, allowing you to refresh your site according to your personal timetable.

Keeping Up with the Joneses

Perhaps the most compelling argument for building a website—besides reaching a wider audience with fewer marketing dollars—is convenience. Your clients will have instantaneous, 24-hour access to your product, ensuring that when she wakes from her nightmare and searches online for help, you don't lose Mrs. Jones to another financial planner, one who invested the time and money necessary to build and maintain a quality website.