

# The Straight Truth About Web Site Building Tools

By Eileen Turtle Parzek

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## THE STRAIGHT TRUTH ABOUT WEB SITE BUILDING TOOLS

Most business owners today know that having a web site is an essential component of marketing. In the past, the choices were to hire a professional web designer, hire a local teenager to create a site for mall money, or learn to do it yourself. Often the last two options, which were the least expensive, were how small businesses had to go. The results are often not what businesses need to grow, reach, and impress new potential customers.

In the last few years, the options for small businesses to get a site developed have changed dramatically. There are now sophisticated "site builder" tools available to small business owners, bundled with many web hosting packages. By using templates, and a content management system to manage updates to the site, it became easier to set up and maintain a web site, and many development companies have canned this functionality, for a fee. Hosting providers are increasingly offering tools to automate the web site building process, and with good reason. This new option has many benefits, as long as the business owner recognizes that there are trade offs and limitations to getting a web site this way.

One of the biggest attractions for site building tools is the cost. It won't necessarily cost less to get your site this way, but it does provide a way to spread the cost over time. It still costs money - for example, you can pay \$50 per month for the next two years, or \$1,200. But this cost very often includes hosting, and a domain name, along with a lot of features which would cost more individually, so it really can save money. For a small business wanting ecommerce, it can be even more attractive because to have a custom built, full featured e-commerce site can easily cost thousands of dollars.

For the “do it yourself,” site building tools are a boon because they make web site building seem so easy – just click here, enter that, and voila – you have a web site. At least, that is the perception! Of course, professional web designers know there are a few more things to know, but we do find some irony in the fact that web developers, in their quest to improve and better the web, have made themselves optional. Most site building tools today are very robust, making it simple to add forms, searching, maps, guest books, calendars, and a whole variety of elements to a web site. Even better, the hosting company sometimes offers an entire suite of services – the site builder, email marketing, search engine optimization and statistics, all in one package along with the hosting.

So, why would anyone hire a professional? First, the site building tools, though increasingly robust, often lack in design and layout flexibility. For example, they might depend on a standard layout that has a banner across the top, menu down the side. If you want to have your navigation across the top and perhaps a sub banner under it, you might not have that option. Many businesses have already outgrown their first or second site, and want something customized to their business. Since all site builders differ, it is possible that you could want features and functionality within your site which is not available within the system. Still, some site builders support development languages like PHP, making it possible to customize the site with the help of a programmer. Some site builders include ecommerce, but they do not all do it the same way. A few utilize PayPal – but not credit cards. Some use a particular credit card processing service and won't accommodate anything else. The bottom line is that it is important to look at sites that were built using the tool you're considering and research all of the features that are included; to be sure that everything you want to do is possible.

There is also a possibility that the service will require you to keep some branding on the site telling people that you used their tool. This is more common with the free site builders – which pay for themselves by putting ads on your site. If your goal is to build a business web site, it's really not worth sacrificing your professional image by getting something free, which screams CHEAP.

The biggest downfall to using a site builder and doing it yourself is that it really isn't quite as easy as they say it is, to do it right. A tool can make things happen – but if you don't know what to make happen, it is either a useless tool or a dangerous one. There is a learning curve to knowing how to present information online, as well as for

using the site builder. In other word, the fuller featured the tool; the more there is to learn. If you aren't familiar with color theory, use of typography, information architecture, layout and design, you can potentially make something that will hurt your business more than help it. So, unless you are already computer and web savvy, figuring out all the features within your web hosting and site builder package can be time consuming and frustrating.

Fortunately, there are ways that a small business can take advantage of these new options and still create a functional and professional web site. One way is simply to take the time to research the available tools, and find the one that has the most features and flexibility, meeting your functional requirements. The internet is a massive library of "how to" information, where you can literally teach yourself anything – and with enough time spent, you could potentially learn how to layout information, what colors and fonts work well together, how to conduct your marketing online and optimize the site for search engines. Another approach would be to hire a professional designer simply to get you "off the ground" by handling the administrative set up of your new site package, creating the look of the site and developing the initial structure. That person could also teach you how to manage the content and make changes yourself going forward. This middle ground approach ensures that your site benefits your business and puts a good image forward, while taking advantage of the "pay as you go" budgeting and easy content management features of a site builder.

The first step for a small business owner thinking about having a web site needs to be an honest assessment of how much time, money, talent, patience and computer savvy he or she has, with a clear understanding of the available options. Once this is determined, any small business which needs to be online can be.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eileen 'Turtle' Parzek is a veteran web designer and an online marketing & communications consultant who has been working from home and virtually since 1995. You can subscribe to her free monthly newsletter called Increase Your Reach: Infuse Your Marketing with Technology at <http://www.soho-it-goes.com>

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