FAQs About Starting a Website
by Valerie Parham-Thompson
valerie@tortugatech.com

Now that you know why you want a website, you're ready to go. What now? What do you do to get started? What does all this web lingo mean? Help is here!

Domain Name

What is a domain name? The domain name is also known as the URL, the website address, or simply "your website." Mine is tortugatech.com.

What should my domain name be? Your domain name is important for two reasons: (1) people will associate you with your website, so it's a marketing tool; and (2) search engines (like Google—more on search engines later) will assume your website relates to your domain name, so it should be relevant to your topic.

Can you help me decide my domain name? Yes, we can. We can help you find available domain names related to your business. You can also search for a "domain name spinner" online.

How do I register my domain name? We register our domain names at linkskydomains.com, but quality is not terribly important. Find out where a friend or colleague registered her site and use the same domain registrar. You don't need any add-ons like hosting or search engine submission at this point. This should cost you about $10-15, but you can also find sales often. If you are using your home address as your business address, you should choose to make your registration Private. This should cost you about $3 more. You will have to renew your domain name (usually yearly, but you can also choose to purchase several years at a time).

Hosting

What is hosting? Hosting is the service of displaying your website when people type in your domain name. This is done using a *server* (a computer and the software specifically designated for this service).

What kind of server should I have? You have several options for hosting:

(1) For most small businesses, *shared hosting* is sufficient. This is less expensive. The web host will put your site on a server with other sites, and usually limits the space your site will use. Again, for most small businesses, the space allotted will be more than enough.

(2) If you have many transactions per day, many transactions at one time, or a need for secure data, you may need a *dedicated server*. This is more expensive, but your server will be your own. The host is in charge of making sure it is running 24 hours a day, keeping it safe from floods and power outages, and updating the software as needed.

(3) The other option is to buy a server and install it in your home or business. We do not recommend maintaining your own server unless you have an experienced computer staff on call 24 hours a day.

Do I need UNIX or Windows hosting? UNIX hosting is slightly less expensive per month than Windows hosting, and more open source (free to you) programs are available for UNIX. UNIX servers are often thought of as more secure than Windows servers. However, the main consideration is maintaining your *code* (the files on your website). Ask the person who is going to build and/or maintain your website if she prefers UNIX (php, Perl, mySQL) or Windows (ASP, Access, SQL Server) website coding. The end result for your users will not be different.

Who should host my website? Unlike with domain name registration, the quality of web hosting is very important. For shared hosting, we use linksky.com, and we love them because they have very good uptime and the service is responsive and friendly. For dedicated hosting, we use Rackspace.com. I recommend both of these companies wholeheartedly, but you can choose another web host that comes well-recommended from someone you trust.

How much does it cost? Shared hosting is about $5-10 a month for UNIX servers and $20 a month for Windows servers. Add-ons (like databases, calendars, etc.) may be included or may be extra. Dedicated hosting depends on your particular needs, but is in the $400-1000/month range.

What else is included? Hosting should include some *email addresses* so you can have an address such as yourname@yourdomainname.com. Mine is valerie@tortugatech.com. This looks a lot more professional than valerie-tortugatech-com@yahoo.com (for example).

Designing Your Site

What are my options for design? There are many, many options for design. Here are a few:

(1) *Create your own layout* using Microsoft Word or Microsoft Publisher and save as HTML. This may be a quick way to do it, and it's easy because you already know how to use Word. Our experience is that maintaining or changing a site created this way takes longer, and that the design may not look entirely professional. However, if you are on a strict budget and do not have time to learn how to use a *HTML editor* (a software program for editing the files in your website), this may work for you. You can always redesign your site later when you have more time and money.

(2) *Use a site-builder program.* Some web hosts provide a site-builder program for a few extra dollars a month. You choose a design from their list, add your logo, insert some text, press some buttons, and your website is done. This is also a quick way to do it, and maintenance is easy for nonprogrammers to do. The design will look a little better than what you can create in Word or Publisher. The drawback to this is you do not have as much control over adding special things, like calendars or e-commerce catalogs. Also, your competitors may all choose the same design!

(3) *Purchase a pre-made design.* Pre-made designs are also called templates, but that word means a lot of different things. When you purchase a web template, you should receive the design in Photoshop or similar format, the HTML layout files, all images included, the stylesheets, and the fonts used. This will cost about $25-75, plus it might take 5-10 hours to customize it to your needs (adding your text, adding logo, maybe redoing the layout a little bit, maybe changing colors or fonts a little). If a good designer does this customization part, the result will look very professional. If you don't have many changes, and you have a good eye, you can probably do a professional job to it, too. The disadvantage is that, again, your competitors might choose the same design, but there are so many templates available, we've not seen this happen. Also, once you change the colors, placement, text, photos, and logo, it will look unique. This is our suggestion for people on a budget.

(4) *Have a designer create a custom design.* This option takes quite a bit of time and money, but the results will be exactly what you want, and it will look very professional. A custom

design takes into consideration what kind of content and tools you will put on your website. A good designer will listen to your vision, try to understand your target market, and view websites you like for ideas. You will receive several mock-up designs to review, and your choice will be refined until you are happy. This is our suggestion for most people. It should take the most amount of time, and money, but if you are running your entire business from your online storefront, the investment is worth it.

Create the Website

Wait! Didn't you just create the website when you designed it? Well, yes and no. The design is the look of the site, taking into consideration what will be on your website. This other part of website creation is putting all your "stuff" into files using that design. The site outline will be created. Images will be cropped, optimized, and inserted. E-commerce programs will be created or installed. Other *widgets* (little tools that do things, like calendars or search boxes) will be installed. Databases will be installed as necessary. Links will be set up between pages, and to external pages. Text will be edited and added. The *usability* (how well your website visitors can use your site) will be tested. The site will be uploaded and tested again.

After the Website Is Running

What is website maintenance and why do I need it? Your website may need updates (for example, you want your contact information changed on your Contact Us page). Your catalog may need updates (you've added new products). You might want to update your online portfolio. You might even want to add new sections to your website. All this is maintenance.

How much does maintenance cost? You can contract with a company monthly to provide a certain number of hours of maintenance. This could cost around $50/month, with the number of changes limited each month. The more cost-efficient way is to have someone who will update your site on an as-needed basis. We charge by the minute, with no minimum, which is more cost-effective for small businesses with few changes.

Can I maintain my own website? Yes, you can. You will need to purchase HTML editing software. You will also need an FTP program to upload your files to the server (but you can also use Internet Explorer as an FTP program). You may need a photo editing program to crop images. If you have time to learn these things, it is fairly easy to make simple changes to your website files. You might find it a better use of your time to pay someone else to do this. A professional web person can make changes very quickly, simply because she does that kind of things all day long!

What is website marketing and why do I need it? If you have a simple information website that you want people to visit when you tell them about it, you may not need website marketing. If you have your business online and want people nationwide to visit your site (*traffic*), you absolutely need website marketing. Website marketing encompasses all those things that get people to visit your site, including search engine placement, search engine optimization (more on that below), link exchanges, newsgroup posts, blogs, and more. Again, you can contract someone to do a certain amount of this per month, or you can pay someone hourly to do it. Even better, this is something you can do pretty easily if you know your industry and are fairly good at using things on the Internet.

What is search engine optimization? Search engine optimization, or *SEO* as it is sometimes called, is the process of putting text and code in your website that will make your site rise in the list of search results in a search engine's display. For example, if you sell candles, a typical search phrase at Google might be "holiday candles." When users visit Google and submit the phrase "holiday candles," you want them to see your site on the first page of results. If you have a page on your site called Holiday Candles, with lots of text about buying

candles for holidays on that page, and your site is well-linked, and there is nothing else on your site that interferes with the process, then it might be on the first page of Google's results. *That was pretty vague!* Yes, no one really knows how Google or Yahoo, or any other search engine, decides how to display results...it's a secret. A good SEO person knows some good methods, and can guess well at what works, but don't believe anyone who tells you they have a proven, guaranteed method for making sure your site is in the top three results. In addition, Google and other search engines change their *algorithms* (the way they decide to display results) often, so this is a constant process.

What are the most important things in marketing your website?

(1) You should do the design, creation, and maintenance of your site with an eye towards SEO. Analyze and change the title of your pages, the content, and other code to be friendly to the search engines. Then submit your site to the major search engines. Review trends in SEO once every couple months, and decide if you should make changes in text or other content.

(2) Get links to your website. If there is one thing that makes the search engines very happy, it is *incoming links* (links to your website). There are lots of sneaky tricks for getting incoming links, but eventually the search engines learn about them and adjust to exclude these pages. You want lots of links, but more importantly, you want relevant links. This is an ongoing process. Simply do the work of contacting *webmasters* (the people who maintain websites) for sites that have a similar target market and ask them if they would like to do a link or banner exchange. A link is usually a piece of text that links to a site, and a banner is usually an image that links to a site. The other webmaster will ask you to put their link or banner on your site, and they will do the same on theirs. When people (or search engines) visit their site, they will see a link back to your site. Don't worry too much about whether the other site is your competitor, or if they have good or bad ranking in a search engine. The more links, the better.

(3) Market your site online. This is the work of posting to blogs, newsgroups, and other places online. You can hire someone to do this, or you can do it yourself (or both). You can post directly about your website, or you can post about other things in relevant forums and have a link in your signature line. The goal is to get your link out there, online and via email.

(4) Market your site not online. Put your website address on your business card, and hand them out everywhere. Put your website address on flyers, coupons, and brochures. Donate services or products to auctions or fundraisers. Write articles or editorials in the local paper and include your website address. Give speeches to local groups and mention your website address. Get it out there, everywhere!

I hope this article has been helpful to you in learning about the things needed to create and maintain your website. Good luck to you, and contact us if you need help!

Valerie Parham-Thompson
valerie@tortugatech.com
http://www.tortugatech.com