

## A Web Design Primer

You've made some important sales, and gotten positive reviews. You've had a good showing at a recent juried exhibition, and you think your career is about to pick up steam.

Or perhaps you've been on the scene for awhile, but you're in a lull – between galleries or shows, or between commissions.

Can a website kick your career up a notch? Can it actually replace the need for a gallery, a representative, or publicity from other sources?

### Web presence – what it is, and what it isn't

Whether you're a retailer, a consulting firm, an up-and-coming rock band, or an artist – a website is just one element in your marketing and communication strategy. The art of marketing is finding your way to becoming known, to stay known, to differentiate yourself from the crowd, and sell your work.

If you already have a following, a website is a convenient way for people to find you, and your work. It's a vehicle to remind them of what you do, what makes it special, and to share with them what's involved in your artistic process. If you're still an "unknown," it's a place for prospects to *land* when a search brings them to the type of art you create, or to you, by name.

A website will not replace the challenge of identifying markets for your art. It will not replace the networking process, i.e. establishing relationships on your own behalf so your work is displayed, discussed, and promoted.

A website is most useful when managed in conjunction with other activities – as part of your marketing strategy (yes, strategy) for getting known, getting work, participating in the arts community, and sustaining your presence.

Always remember: marketing yourself doesn't have to mean compromising your work. If done effectively, it *does* mean you can afford to keep doing it.

### Where to begin?

If you're uncomfortable or unfamiliar with how to use the web to your advantage, find someone to help – a consultant, or design firm, or some combination of the two.

Look online. Search for web design, web development, web consulting. Search on categories that might pertain to the kind of art you make – commissioned portraits, mixed-media landscapes, abstract, illustration, and so on.

Look at some competing artists' sites. Which ones do justice to the art? To what the artist has to say about the work? Which ones are flat, or not compelling?

Look to the bottom of the home page. An individual or firm that is proud of their work will place their mark – “designed by” – or some other indication. See if it links to *their* website, to see more examples of their work. Or do a web search. If you like their portfolio, their style, their site - add them to your list of possible providers of web design and development services.

### What next?

The following are some topics to address with any prospective designers, developers, or other web service providers you are considering.

- Identify your objectives for the site. Is it referential – a place to hang your bio, contact information, and a handful of images? Do you plan to *sell* from the site? If so – are you planning to offer online purchase, or will the potential buyer contact you through phone or email?
- Do you need Content Management? If you plan to sell from your site, you may need what is called Content Management. That means you’ll want to periodically change out images, reviews, events, or other information about your work. You need a capability to do that – easily – or someone to do it for you.
- Set a realistic scope for your site. It can always be expanded. Tell who you are, what kind of art you make, what makes it special. If you have difficulty expressing yourself (the “artist’s statement”) then find someone who can elaborate on your behalf.
- Have you had some good press? Include reviews, or links to them. Have you helped in any community events, or donated time to not-for-profit organizations? If so, mention those collaborations. This gives you more “content,” and the ability to create links to the press, or to established organizations.
- Quality, quality, quality. Most important – the images you choose, the quality of reproduction, and the look of your site should not be compromised. While no site can ever do justice to viewing art in person, the overall presentation of your site will either enhance it, or detract from it. Don’t skimp for the sake of a few bucks.

If the prices you’re being quoted are daunting, think about this. What is the cost in loss of reputation and loss of potential customers if they visit an artist’s site and it’s visually unappealing? What if it is frequently out of service, slow to load, or difficult to use? What does that say about the quality of the other things that you make?

Remember - your website is a worldwide advertisement for your work, and the most visible communication medium you have to prospects, patrons, galleries, and others.

### What to expect

If your needs are truly simple – 5 or 6 pages, no commercial transactions, no fancy animation, a dozen high-quality images of your work – you should be able to launch your site inexpensively.

But first, educate yourself. There's more involved than finding a friend who can code some html, and magically, create your web pages. At the very least, you need to secure a website, with a name that is yours, or otherwise unique, memorable, and readily "branded" to you and what you do. Through [www.godaddy.com](http://www.godaddy.com), you can purchase a domain name for about \$8/year.

You'll need to secure appropriate hosting services, with adequate storage, email, and other capabilities. Ideally your server will offer options for expansion, including more sophisticated navigation, web links, content management, and more.

As you're building your site, you'll need to make sure it will operate under various web browsers. Then you'll need to make sure it is readily searchable, registered, and easily found.

If you don't understand what some of these things mean, don't worry. A good web designer or developer can help clarify "naming" from "hosting," what constitutes "adequate" storage, and so on.

### **Getting found**

At its simplest, getting found is a matter of keywords in something called "meta tags." These are words or phrases inserted into the website's code. These keywords assist Google, Yahoo, MSN and other search engines in locating you. For example, if you studied at Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) and you do mixed-media pieces and portraits on commission, your site's imbedded keywords might include "Savannah College of Art and Design, SCAD, mixed-media, commissions, portraits."

At its most sophisticated, getting found involves Search Engine Optimization (SEO). This is a comprehensive strategy for getting your site ranked higher in the searching process used by the big online engines. It involves far more than intelligent keywords, and requires specialists who will advise you on your site structure, copy, and other approaches to assist in driving business to your website.

SEO takes more time, and more money. You may not need it, but be sure it's on the table when you're talking to prospective people to design, build, and maintain your site.

### **You're an artist – use your eyes!**

Whatever else you do, look at your own website. Consider, and with a critical eye:

- audience for your art (traditional, innovative, upscale, etc.)
- composition, color, scale
- font size, clarity, appropriateness
- quality of images
- quality of copy
- overall impression.

Would you ignore the presentation of your work at an exhibition? Would you relinquish input on the matting, framing, hanging, and lighting?

Your website is no different. However beautiful or provocative your paintings, sculptures, drawings – poor presentation on a web page can render them utterly forgettable. This is one more reason to seek professionals to assist with this critical investment.

### **Evaluating resources**

Once you've used the Internet to compile a short list, be sure to include the following items in your discussion. Professionals will be proficient in these areas. Be sure to ask about

- hosting services, content management, the need (if any) for SEO
- managing emails, coding for all browsers, guidelines for image sizes so pages won't load too slowly
- assistance and cost of digital reproduction of your work, if you don't have that capability already
- safeguards – security, contingencies if the site crashes
- assistance in refining your message, writing help if you need it, and number of revision cycles included
- options for future expansion – to accommodate updates for shows, press releases, new images, and so on
- approach for driving business to your site, if that's a goal
- upfront conceptual design – 2 or 3 presentation options for you to choose from, before the actual coding of your site begins
- payment terms – how much, and when; tie payment to deliverables
- ongoing costs – to renew your website's (domain) name, for hosting services, content management, commercial capabilities.

Above all, check portfolios and references.

How much might this cost? Depending upon what you need, and where you live, you may be able to get a high-performing, visually appropriate, soup-to-nuts and well-executed website for \$500 to \$1500. For more pages, sophisticated navigation options, Search Engine Optimization, content management capabilities, transaction services – it can easily run into much more.

Daunted by that price? Some firms may be willing to barter, or work with you in setting up a payment schedule. Others won't.

Whatever you do, keep the price in context. What do you charge for one original painting? What is the potential if you catch the eye of a single dedicated patron, collector, designer, or curator who sees promise in your work?

Remember – this is worldwide advertising. Now look at that price again. Does it still seem like too much?

### **The bottom line**

The bottom line is business. Unless you're independently wealthy, or content to make your living in another field while pursuing art as a sideline, you can't escape the business of art, and you can't "outsource" it until you're successful enough to pay someone else to worry about it.

Even then – you'd better keep a hand in. You own your success. And you own your website solution, and its ability to serve your needs, or leave them unaddressed.

For the best result –

- Stay involved from start to finish.
- Don't bite off too much, but don't sacrifice quality for a few dollars either.
- Don't be afraid of entrepreneurs, individual resources, or small boutique design firms. They may be highly skilled, and innovative.
- Make sure someone you work with understands the marketing impact of your website, and can assist in identifying your goals – short-term, and for the future.
- Check the portfolio and references of everyone you are considering for the work.
- Look at your site, as you would an exhibition.
- Insist on excellence of presentation - font, colors, space for the eye to rest, size of visuals, and overall design. It should live up to the quality of your art.

Don't be blind-sighted by "dot com" after your name, and think that's all it takes. Don't accept a sloppy or inappropriate solution for your website. An inadequate web presence can be worse than none at all.

*Do* find professionals to help. It's smart business, and well worth it.

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