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Are Free Websites Worth the Cost?

By Kristi Stangeland © 2008, All Rights Reserved

It was a little unsettling to read. As I worked my way through a *Wall Street Journal* article entitled *How to Create a Successful Website For Nothing (or Almost Nothing)*, I found myself repeating the phrase, "Yes, but..."

The article was directed to small business owners and startups that were looking to get a website going for as little as possible. And yes, I'll tell you now, you can indeed launch a website for about \$8 - \$10. The real question is, are you sure you that's what you want to do?

What's in a Domain Name?

Sometimes called a URL, sometimes a web address; the domain name is your location on the Internet. Something like www.website.com or .net, .tv, etc. Before jaunting off to GoDaddy.com or wherever you choose to register, you'll want to give serious consideration to the URL. Chances are your first choice won't be available. So have several options in mind.

It's easiest to have a domain name that matches your company name, but that isn't always possible. If you're concerned with achieving high search engine positioning, you might want to consider domain names that include keywords. This can sometimes influence your rank.

Don't make the domain name too long or too complex. If you can't easily tell a person what your URL is, it's most likely too complicated. I've seen some sites with domain names like www.I-Want-You-To-Buy-From-Me.com. Can you imagine a customer calling on the phone to ask for your web address and having to tell them, "It's www dot I dash want dash you dash to dash buy dash from dash me dot com." That's enough to make your head spin! Keep it simple.

Finding Your Place in the Cyber World

Yes, there are places that will host your website for free. They have been around since before the Internet boom. But, as mentioned in the *Wall Street Journal* article, most will want to run ads on your website. What isn't mentioned is that they will want these ads to be in the most prominent positions on your web pages. What the article also left out is that you have no control over the types of ads that run.

They could be adult-related ads. They could be ads for your competition. The host could choose to run ads for gambling sites or anything they desired all in exchange for free hosting.

Another caution is security. The majority of these free hosts don't offer the most protected of setups. Their servers can easily be hacked into which will, at the very least, disrupt your service. On a scarier level, hackers can install viruses and other nasty things that will be passed to anyone who clicks to your home page. Do you really want to be known as a site that's responsible for contaminating everyone who visits?

Also, free web hosts often cut corners. This means you'll probably get precious few website stats which can be very important in letting you know where your visitors are coming from, which pages they frequent most and the path they follow while on your site. Support almost always suffers as well so if you have questions or complaints, they may fall on deaf ears.

Professionalism = Trust, Trust = Confidence, Confidence = Sales

Oh no, here comes an overused (but highly applicable) cliché: You get what you pay for. Sure, startups may not have but \$8 to sink into a website. They may be eager to get started and want to move forward right now. My advice: Don't. Rather than using a free web host with cookie-cutter designs, ads plastered all over and questionable functionality, save your money and wait until you can afford to hire a professional. The bar has risen and homemade-looking sites do not build confidence in your visitors. If they aren't confident that your site is trustworthy, they simply won't buy.

But that's not all. The words you put on your site are vitally important. Web page text (called "copy") is what sells your visitors on your products or service. It's also a major factor in getting high search engine rankings. Rather than looking amateurish, take a copywriting course and learn to write professional-sounding search engine copy or hire a pro to do it for you. The difference in sales will quickly show you it was worth every cent.

Free is not always all it's cracked up to be. Before you waste time and energy developing a free site ask yourself if it's really worth the cost.

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