

Chapter 34

Specifications for a Website Audit Tool for Small Businesses

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ABSTRACT

These days, small businesses typically have a web presence beyond their own website, employing the services of other online providers to host details of their businesses and hopefully attract more customers to them. This chapter examines the notion of a web presence audit tool for small businesses to enable them to track the various website features that they have implemented on their own, and other, websites over time. A 'website feature' can be something as simple as listing the business address and telephone number on the website, but it can also include more advanced features such as online ordering and purchasing. The chapter discusses the specifications for such a website audit tool and suggests a relational database design for the tool. The resultant specifications are to be trialed in a number of settings before being introduced to a wider group of small businesses.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the notion of a web presence audit tool for small businesses to enable them to track the various website features that they have implemented on their own, and other, websites over time and to enable them to monitor which website features competitors are implementing. The need for such a tool has been identified by the author in a number of research studies that

have shown that small businesses often 'forget' to include common website features on their website – especially after a website redesign. The chapter discusses the specifications for such a website audit tool by examining the particular types of website features and where and when they will be hosted and suggests a relational database design for the tool that would allow small businesses to track their own use of website features over time.

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BACKGROUND

Small businesses face many challenges in relation to effective website use - they are often poor planners, have limited resources (skills; finances and available time), often do not know where to source relevant expertise and are overwhelmed by having to keep the business afloat on a day to day basis (Burgess, Sellitto & Karanasios 2009). One of the tools that small businesses are increasingly turning to is a website to help them to promote their goods and communicate with customers. For instance, a recent study of small businesses in Australia (Telstra Corporation 2009) revealed that 56% of small and medium sized enterprises had a website. The proportion of businesses with a website tended to increase as the size of the business increased (for instance, 46% of businesses with 1-2 employees had a website; 72% with 5-9 employees had a website; and 84% of businesses with 20-99 employees had a website).

Each of these websites consists of a combination of 'website features'. A 'website feature' can be something as simple as listing the business address and telephone number on the website, but it can also include more advanced features such as 'Frequently Asked Questions', web logs (blogs) and online ordering and purchasing. Typically, different website features will be incorporated by businesses in different industries. Over time, small businesses often add and remove some of these features without any (apparent) logical reason. In some instances, this can be because the feature has been overlooked during a website update or redesign and has just been forgotten in the newer version of the website. This has happened with features as simple as the business telephone number - which, when forgotten, can have serious implications when a key method of contacting the business is absent from the website (Burgess, Bingley & Sellitto 2007).

There are many ways to classify website features. Jelassi and Enders (2005) have suggested

that 'virtual' dimensions could be used by a business to help them select which Internet features to employ when engaging with customers. They describe the dimensions as:

- **Virtual information space:** This includes online advertising and posting business information.
- **Virtual communication space:** Is where the business engages in a two-way online communication with its customers, typically through email, chat facilities or bulletin boards.
- **Virtual distribution space:** Allows for the delivery of digital goods (such as online books, software) and services (such as financial advice).
- **Virtual transaction space:** Allows for the acceptance of online orders and payments.

Burgess et al (2009) suggest that website features typically fall into one of five categories:

- Features that help customers to locate and/or contact the business (such as the business address and telephone number).
- Features that tell a customer about the products and services of a business (for instance, online catalogues).
- Features that help to provide added value for goods and services (such as instructions on how to use products effectively).
- Features that assist in building an online community of customers (for instance, bulletin boards, blogs or 'wikis').
- Features that allow customers to order, pay for and sometimes even receive goods online (for instance, music downloads).

Different categories of website features can assist small businesses in different ways, by improving business efficiencies, adding value to products and services and generally assisting with

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