

Weaving your WEB

A WELL-DESIGNED WEB SITE
CAN BE ONE OF YOUR HARDEST
WORKING EMPLOYEES — AND
IT'S AVAILABLE 24 HOURS A DAY,
SEVEN DAYS A WEEK.

by MARY ANNE SHEW

The spectacular failure of dot-com enterprises in 2001 led many business owners to conclude that having a Web site is a waste of time and money. However, millions of businesses continue to own and maintain Web sites as a successful part of their marketing efforts. And a green industry company that offers a high-quality, information-based site that reflects well on itself gains a competitive advantage over those businesses that do not. Furthermore, an effective Web site need not be large or elaborate, and nothing has to be sold over it.

Whether you realize it or not, your customers are online, and there's research to prove it. The University of California, Los Angeles, issues an annual *Internet Report* to assess US Internet access and use. According to the 2001 report, 72.3 percent of Americans go online for an average 9.8 hours per week. Web browsing and buying online are among the top five most popular Internet activities. The main reason why people start to use the cyber superhighway is to obtain information quickly. As many companies have learned, consumers enjoy the ability to shop online and compare before they buy — even if they don't want to buy online.

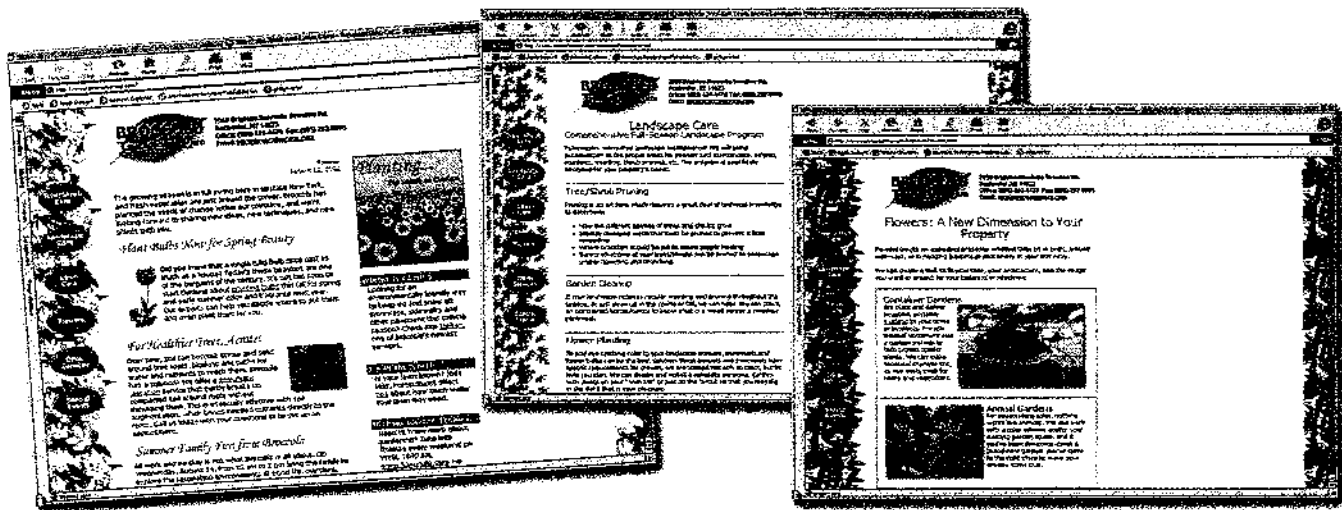
John Winkler, owner of Site Technology Inc., a Walworth, NY, landscape design/build company, launched www.landscapexcel.com in mid-2001 because he believes people like to shop around in the privacy of their homes via their PCs.

"I decided to have a Web site because people like to get a sneak preview of a company in private without a salesperson in their midst," explains Winkler. "People are able to view our pictures and read our information before they decide to call us rather than acting on a blind referral or responding to a print ad."

BUILDING YOUR BUSINESS. A Web site that functions as an electronic brochure is accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In today's busy world, people have to shop for products and services when they can, whether over their lunch hour, after the kids are in bed or on weekends. They have little time for personal meetings or phone calls during normal business hours. A Web site allows potential customers to learn about your garden center's products and services, hours and location, the geographic area you cover and other information at their convenience. Including a frequently asked questions (FAQs) page on your Web site can be a time-saver, as well as an opportunity to educate customers about what they should expect from a quality retailer, landscaper or wholesaler.

Like professionally designed business cards and a dedicated phone line, a Web site adds credibility to your business. "I feel it is a good business decision because in this day and age it almost confirms our legitimacy," Winkler says.

Jody Mills, staff horticulturist and marketing communications manager for Broc-



MARY ANNE SHERW

When properly created and promoted, Web sites can prove a valuable partner in your business.

colo Tree & Lawn Care, Rochester, NY, says the company's Web site increases its visibility in the marketplace. "We have many media contacts who rely on us as experts in the field. We encourage them to use our Web site as a resource," she says. The landscape-care operation submitted its site, www.broccoligroup.com, for the 2000 Freeman L. Parr Award to recognize marketing and communications excellence sponsored by the National Arborist Association — and won. "Winning the award was not only confirmation that we're on the right track with our site, but it gained us publicity we might not have had otherwise," adds Mills.

Finally, a Web site is a cost-effective opportunity to provide information that helps customers in decision making. As a communications medium, printed brochures cannot match the flexibility of Web pages when it comes to content. Adding or removing products or explaining a new service can be done at any time on a Web site. Color is also a basic feature of Web pages, whereas four-color printing can substantially increase the cost of a printed brochure.

GETTING STARTED. Choosing a professional. While many companies save money by designing their own Web sites, Winkler and Mills hired me to create sites that reflect the range and high quality of their services. "Our expertise is in tree and lawn care and landscape services. We wanted our Web site to look professional, so we hired a professional to redesign our initial site," notes Mills. Winkler didn't have the time, the knowledge, the people or the desire to create a site internally. "I have always believed that you do what you do best and concentrate all your efforts on what you do best. If you do that, you should have the money to hire someone who creates Web sites for a living," he explains.

As the owner of a Web site design and development operation, I am often asked by potential customers why they should hire me rather than create a site on their own. I'm sure landscapers encounter the same question in their search for new business. Green industry professionals have to know horticulture, meteorology, chemistry, environmental law and other disciplines in order to be successful. The

Internet industry demands a similar commitment from its practitioners to keep up with programming languages and tools, security and privacy laws, site design, technical standards and much more. A professional landscaper works hard to stay current with the design experience, technical knowledge and tools for the job. So does a professional Web site designer.

If you decide to hire an outside company to create your Web site, plan to spend \$500 or more for the services, depending on how complex and large you want your site to be. Additional out-of-pocket expenses include registering a domain name (\$15 per year) and arranging for a Web hosting service (\$8 per month and up, depending on the features required; that fee usually includes at least one e-mail account).

There are many ways to find a good consultant, but one of the best is word-of-mouth. Ask your suppliers, find out who designed local sites that you like, or see if a Web designer is a member of the business networking groups to which you belong, such as the chamber of commerce or Rotary International.

Questions to ask a Web site designer

When interviewing Web site design companies, consider the following questions:

Site development and maintenance

- Who will actually develop the Web site?
- Please provide three or four URLs of sites you've created. (If there isn't a link to the developer's site from the client's site, call those companies to verify who created them.)
- What are your credentials and experience?
- How will you communicate and stay in touch with me?

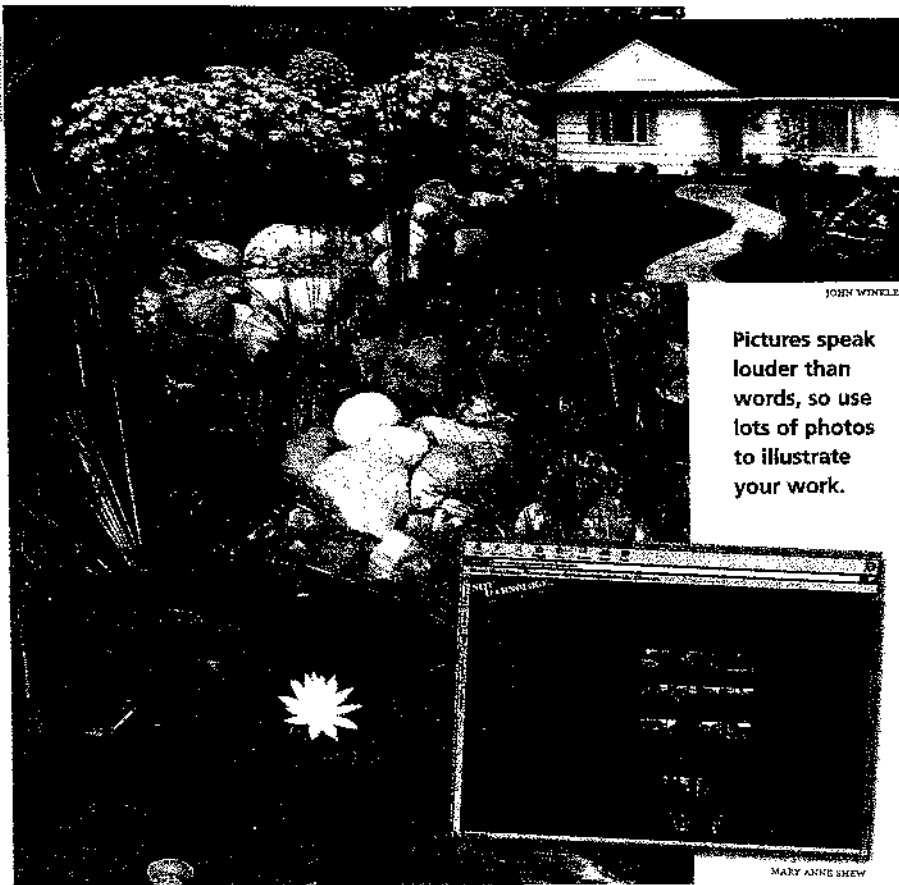
- What will you need from me in order to create the site?
- Do you provide a written proposal? Will it include an estimated or fixed price?
- What is your process for letting me know if the cost will be different (either higher or lower) than the original estimate?
- If I need to cancel the project after it has started, what happens to my deposit?
- What software tools will you use to develop the site? (For example, if the designer is using Microsoft FrontPage software, is he or she using a template

that comes with it or are you getting a custom design?)

- Does your cost estimate include on-going maintenance? If so, how much (hours, days)?

Intellectual property rights

- Who owns my site's copyright once the site is developed?
- Who is responsible for ensuring the appropriate copyrights are obtained for any material used on the site?
- Who is legally responsible if material on my site is used in violation of its copyright?



Pictures speak louder than words, so use lots of photos to illustrate your work.

Once you have two or three names, check out their own Web sites. Most designers link to client sites they have created. If their work appeals to you, arrange a meeting to discuss your needs, assess their capabilities and see how the chemistry between you works. "Make sure you are comfortable with your Web manager," Mills cautions, "and that this person will work to make your Web site a reflection of your company philosophy."

Before you select a professional to bring your operation online, however, consider how you would like your business to improve as a result of having a Web site. Then ask potential designers if that vision is possible. The more realistic your expectations, the more successful the project. You should also ask questions regarding your site's development and maintenance (see "Questions to ask a Web site designer" sidebar, page 43).

Discuss your ideas with each designer, and request a written proposal that clearly states what the chosen individual will do for your company. If you have an event or other deadline for which you want the Web site to be ready, such as a trade show, be sure to tell each candidate so he or she can take it into consideration. The more information you give a Web-design professional, the more accurate his or her proposal will be. Bring copies of your current marketing materials (brochures, flyers and so forth), and

be sure to let the designer know if you have a specific number of Web pages in mind. Finally, don't forget to ask for references — and call them.

When you have made your choice, insist on a written contract that spells out everything to which you and the designer have agreed. This is especially important with regards to who owns the copyright to the site, as some designers retain ownership, and that can cause problems if you want to hire someone else later.

Designing on your own. If you would like to design your own site, you must set aside the time to learn about the process and some of the technology involved. I recommend using software or an online Web hosting service that includes professionally designed templates (see "Do-it-yourself options" sidebar, opposite). Also consider consulting a book on Web design (see suggested reading list, opposite). Choose a publication that makes sense to you, and use it to steer clear of major mistakes and create a functional, navigable, appealing site.

Designing your own Web site also means allocating the time to create it. For a simple site with four or five pages, set aside at least 20 hours to gather content, create the pages, type the information into those pages, and test the site on the Web hosting service you have chosen. Try to keep it simple. One of the mistakes beginners often make is using too many

fonts or placing images in distracting positions, creating a site that resembles a ransom note cut from newspapers.

Remember: Bigger is not necessarily better. Even a well-designed, one-page site can be an asset to your business if it has the information people usually want to know about you. Free estimates, new products, available plants, geographic area served and similar information can be conveyed in a few words and save your customers time.

How information is organized is also very important. Most company Web sites include pages that clearly explain what the business does (with "Products" and/or "Services" pages) and who the owner is (with an "About Us" page). For example, landscaping businesses should make it clear what happens after a potential customer calls for an estimate and whether that estimate is free. Nurseries should provide their location (a map is helpful if you serve a city), hours of operation and some idea of the range of plants offered.

Winkler's site has eight pages, while Mills oversees more than 50 on Broccolo's. Both operations understand the landscaping business is not only about trees and flowers, it's about creating curb appeal and enhancing pride in home ownership. Photos powerfully display each company's understanding of the factors online customers consider when choosing a business to work for them.

Winkler's site includes photos on individual pages, as well as a separate gallery page, providing potential customers with several examples of projects he has handled and plantings he has designed. While a gallery page is still under consideration for Broccolo's site, photos are included throughout to illustrate special aspects of the company. For example, an image of an electric truck demonstrates the operation's concern for the environment, while displaying Audubon certification shows a respect for wildlife. The key is not how many pages your site has, but how well your site addresses your customers' concerns and reflects the quality of work that your company provides.

LINKING & PROMOTING. If you decide to link to related sites, be sure that each site to which you link reflects as well on your business as your site does. Most viewers understand when they click on a link that takes them off your site, your company is not responsible for what they find on the next. However, the site they've jumped to from your business' site does create an impression on them, and you want it to be positive because the second site pro-

vides visitors with information they didn't know or is otherwise useful. A negative impression could influence their view of your company.

Good links to consider include Web sites for any business or professional organization to which you belong that help communicate your company's integrity. Also link to any articles you may have written for trade publications that are online. If someone has quoted you in the press, link to that as well, if possible.

Once your site is active, be sure to review your membership in various organizations to see if they offer an online member directory in which you can include your URL. Consider asking your suppliers for reciprocal links — that is, you will link to them if they will link to you. Having links on other sites to yours is something that search engines often check to ensure your site is really about what you say it is.

Even once your site is set and links made, your work isn't done. A major reason why Web sites are disappointing to their owners is the owners fail to realize *having* a site is only half the job. You need to tell people about it. So include your domain name (www.yourbusiness.com) on your business' printed material: brochures, flyers, invoices, price tags, sales receipts, business cards and stationery. But don't stop there. "Make your Web site distinctive, but clear and informative, and *promote it* on your trucks and uniforms," Mills suggests.

Site promotion is crucial. Bring up your Web site at every reasonable opportunity in conversations with suppliers, customers and business associates. Be certain your employees are aware of what is on the site so they can also refer potential customers to it. Include your URL in ads you place in newspapers, magazines and the Yellow Pages. You never know where people will learn about your company.

Whether you create your site yourself or hire someone to do it, ensure it includes the right key words, called meta-tags, in the code. Your Web designer should ask for words and phrases that apply to your business and industry. These key words should also include the name of the company, the name of the owner, the names of the cities and towns in which you operate and any other terms that have come to represent your business. Search engines look for these key words when they add sites to their databases.

When created and promoted properly, a Web site can prove extremely valuable. "Our Web site has generated upsales from existing customers and inquiries

Do-it-yourself options

If you decide to create and maintain a Web site yourself or have an employee do it, the following resources may help:

Microsoft FrontPage. Microsoft designed this product for use by people who have little or no knowledge of hypertext markup language (HTML), the basic language of all Web sites, or associated technologies such as Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) and JavaScript. The software generates all necessary codes for you and helps upload them to your Web site. It comes with a wide variety of templates that allow some customization and has a fill-in-the-blank approach to the content.

Be aware that if you use some of FrontPage's fancier features, your Web site must have FrontPage extensions installed on the Web server where your site resides. Be sure to look for that feature before committing money to a Web hosting service.

Macromedia HomeSite. HomeSite is an HTML code editor, so it requires a basic knowledge of HTML. It also allows you to edit a site in graphic mode, that is, as a Web page. The tool comes with tutorials for HTML and CSS; they may be enough to get you started. Unlike FrontPage, features you include in your site through this tool work on any Web hosting service you choose. HomeSite also helps you upload the pages you create to your Web site.

Online Web Creation/Hosting Services. Another option is to sign up with a Web-based company that provides Web hosting and Web site creation tools as a package. The advantages are these services are reasonably priced, require no additional software beyond the Web browser you ordinarily use (for example, Microsoft Internet Explorer or Netscape) and integrate all you need into one monthly fee. They have a wide range of professionally designed templates to customize with color, your company's

from prospective customers," says Mills. Winkler's site has helped him clinch sales because customers tell him they check it out after speaking with him.

Having a Web site is like having a silent but hardworking partner. Make sure it reflects the quality of your work, and constantly tell people it is there. Then it will become a key factor in your success.

Mary Anne Shew is the founder and owner of Shew Technology (www.shewtech.com), a Rochester, NY, Web site, Internet marketing and business development company. She has more than 20 years of experience helping a wide spectrum of businesses and organizations use technology to their advantage. ♥

logo and content. You can also use your own domain name rather than the longer one they provide.

One downside is you do not own the copyright for the template you use; the site's graphics and overall look belong to the Web company selected. If you should decide to change hosting services, you cannot move the site intact.

Examples of this kind of service include www.verisign.com, www.homestead.com and www.directnic.com. I have not used these Web site creation services, but I have reviewed their offerings, which look reasonable. However, be sure to investigate them to your own satisfaction before signing up.

Suggested reading

The following books offer well-written explanations of the Web site creation process, the tradeoffs involved and the technology available. They are helpful to do-it-yourselfers who need a guide, as well as to anyone who hires an outside company.

Building Web Sites for Dummies. This book offers the broad perspective of what is involved in building and running a Web site. It examines navigation principles, affiliation possibilities, communication with your users, e-commerce aspects and other wide-ranging topics. It also covers hypertext markup language (HTML) fairly well. The companion CD-ROM includes evaluation versions of such tools as Paint Shop Pro (graphics creation), HomeSite (HTML editor), Fireworks (graphics creation) and Dreamweaver (HTML editor and a great deal more). Note the versions of the software packages on the CD may no longer be available, as upgraded versions have been released. However, the trial software will help you choose from among the tools.

Internet Marketing for Dummies. This book helps a Web site owner plan for and build an effective site. While it does include the basics concerning building a site, most of the book is devoted to dealing with the site once it is on the Internet. This includes assessing how much of your target market is online, choosing site characteristics that attract visitors, marketing through e-mail newsletters and more.

101 Ways to Promote Your Web Site. The third edition released in July 2001 has kept this book up-to-date. It discusses keeping your site search engine friendly, submitting to search engines, getting permission to market to customers and prospects, using e-mail to market, and just about every aspect of Internet marketing in today's world.