

# THE BOTTOM LINE

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## Two words on firm's Website reap five-figure accounting assignment

*Keep it simple*

By Alan Salmon

TORONTO—Electronic accounting were two words on the Ormsby & Mackan Chartered Accountants Website that led to a five-figure assignment from a client with nine companies located in Vancouver, New York and London, England.

The client was searching the Internet and discovered this innovative Mississauga, Ontario-based chartered accounting firm. Yet, other firms that have spend considerable money building a Website haven't received a single inquiry.

The widely differing results are not merely a matter of luck. They happened because of what each firm did in developing and maintaining their sites. Firms that are successful with Web marketing have carefully integrated their Internet site with their overall marketing plan. Their site is the starting point and is designed to familiarize potential clients about their firm and generate inquiries.

Simply mounting a site does not guarantee traffic. To get hits you have to tell people that you are there. Common ways of doing this include putting the Web address on your business cards, letterhead and firm literature.

There is no question that an Internet site is a great way to reach prospective clients, as well as reinforce your image with existing clients. There is obvious value in getting someone to visit your site, but the real payback comes when that individual makes return visits. There may not be an immediate payback, but someday they may need your services, and your firm name will be remembered.

A home page should be designed to make it easy for visitors to find information about your firm. To often I see sites where name, address and contact information is buried on another page. You should also make every effort to capture the names of your visitors. These become an invaluable future marketing tool. Provide a guest book for them to sign in return for a free newsletter, or an invitation to a seminar. You could also offer them a free e-mail newsletter.

What are the key issues in designing an effective site? First, it should be more than just an electronic brochure that lists the capabilities of the firm and biographies of the partners. There should be a variety of content that is of interest to both existing and potential clients and this content should be updated regularly.

A useful part of any public accounting site are links to other relevant sites. These hyperlinks will lead your visitors to bookmark your site and come back again easily to another interesting site.

Many firms use their Internet site to showcase additional service areas or their specialty niches. Remember that if you do this, you are not just trying to attract new clients, you are also going after existing clients for additional business.

Too often clients will go elsewhere because they don't realize that you can provide the same service. A list of hyperlinked sites that are specific to your areas of specialty will be particularly helpful because the viewer will more closely identify you with a specialty. A great way to maximize your exposure is to develop reciprocal links whereby

you agree to provide a hyperlink to a site in return for that site adding a hyperlink to yours.

When it comes to the actual design of a site, keep it simple. Some firms get carried away with pages that are flashy, include lots of frames and take forever to load. Most of the time a plain background and small graphics that load quickly is the right way to go.

There are certain built-in costs for an Internet site. These include the time involved by firm members to prepare, maintain and update the content and to monitor e-mail responses.

Other costs include the site design, maintenance costs and the fees for a provider to host the site. These costs will vary widely depending on the type of information you provide, the site's design and complexity, the method of hosting the site and the technology experience of the firm's members. If you go to a professional Internet design company for a complicated site, the initial cost can run in the thousands of dollars.

A much simpler and less-expensive approach is for someone in the firm to design the site. A number of inexpensive off-the-shelf programs are available.

Very few accounting firms have the technology to host their own site, so a third-party provider will normally be used. If designing or updating is not involved by the third party the cost will be minimal (less than fifty dollars a month).

In addition to attracting viewers through the normal marketing channels, you should also make sure that the various Internet search engines list your site.

You should register your site with all of the major search engines. When you fill in the registration forms be careful in selecting categories, geographical area and key words. These choices define who will find you. □