

CREATING AN EFFECTIVE WEBSITE FOR YOUR FARM & RANCH RECREATION PROGRAM

Your website should be designed to accomplish two things:

1. Draw prospective guests to your site

2. Convert prospective guests to paying guests

Keep these two goals in mind every step of the way!

Whether you are designing and building your site yourself, or using an outside professional, consider the following:

1. PREPARATION

- a. **BUDGET:** You can design and build a website yourself if you have the time and aptitude, but in this web-competitive world, consider hiring a professional. It may seem expensive, but compare the one-time cost of creating a professional website with the ongoing costs of printing and mailing brochures. Compare the effectiveness of a website's constant presence on the Internet to that of a one-time print advertisement in a magazine that gets tossed. Your website will continue to work for you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with minimal additional expense and time from you. It's worth the extra investment to make sure it's done right the first time.
- b. **RESEARCH:** Review other websites. Look at your competitors' sites, as well as any others that you find appealing. Determine what you like and don't like about the overall design, tone, features, and functionality of each.
- c. **CONSIDER YOUR AUDIENCE:**
 - **Sophistication:** If you're trying to attract a higher-end clientele wanting a higher-end experience (gourmet cuisine, boutique toiletries, atypical activities, etc.), consider more sophisticated or elegant graphics and images. Likewise, if you're all about a "downhome" experience (family-style meals, simple cabins, focus on riding, etc.), project that in your webpage's style and photos. Use your website to fully communicate who you are, but don't try to be something you're not.
 - **Audience goals:** Ask yourself what you think they want to see on your site. For content, they probably want to know to know about you, your ranch's history, activities, lodging, dining, rates, policies, etc. For images, they probably want to see beautiful scenery, wildlife, and people engaged in ranch activities...and, of course, interior shots of guest accommodations, including bathrooms.
 - **Technical Issues:** Your audience will be viewing your site with different Internet speeds, browser types, monitor resolutions, and computer platforms.

All of these will affect how quickly and nicely your site loads for them. For instance, if your target audience is more likely to have (dial-up) internet service, consider using fewer images and other slow-loading features. If your site loads slowly, they'll quickly move on to the next ranch's site. This is especially important with your home page. You can find more information about these issues on the Internet, or ask your Web professional.

2. DESIGN

- a. **LAYOUT:** Sketch out a basic layout/design before doing any programming. You can do this in an outline or flow chart format. When in doubt, keep it simple. As one web design company states, "A simple website is often more professional than an extravagant one." Remember that this may be your customer's first impression of you. It should be both compelling, as well as distinctive from your competitors (but so should your ranch recreation program!).
- b. **CONSISTENCY:** Be consistent in design features such as fonts, colors, images, and functionality. Create a template with the same background, banner, sidebar, etc. to use as a "blank" for each page. This is also quicker than creating each page from scratch.
- c. **FONTS:** Do not use unusual fonts since not all browsers can read them. Don't use more than two or three fonts on each page.
- d. **SOUND:** Do not use sound files that load automatically. Consider that some viewers are looking at your site in public places (or are sneaking time surfing the web!). Sound files also slow down the page's load time. If you want to include a soundtrack to your website, include an option for viewers to turn it on (and then off again!).
- e. **PAGE LENGTH/WIDTH:** Keep each page short. Viewers may not take the time to scroll down too far. Make sure your page isn't so wide that viewers have to use the horizontal scroll buttons to see any of it.
- f. **NAVIGATION:** Keep navigation simple. Include a navigation bar that is the same on each page that allows access to all the main sections. This is usually along the top or side. If the page is very long, include the same navigation options at the bottom. On any page, it should be easy to tell where you are, where you came from, and where you're going. It should never take more than three "clicks" to get to any important piece of information and it should never take more than one "click" to get back to the home page.
- g. **BACKGROUND:** Avoid using printed or photo backgrounds because they distract from the text. A solid subtle color is a good choice.
- h. **WHITE SPACE:** Don't be afraid to leave space between photos, text, and other design elements. It helps to focus the eye on specific aspects of your page, and avoid a cluttered look.
- i. **CONTACT INFORMATION:** Include complete contact information on every page! You never know which page might spark an interest in the consumer wanting more information. Consider your (and your customers') preferred form of communication. For example, if you'd rather have an opportunity to speak with a prospective guest over the phone, make your phone number more obvious than the rest of the information. But always list all available options (email, phone, fax, mailing address) so that your viewers can choose what works best for them.

3. BEFORE YOU “GO LIVE”

- a. **ACCURACY:** Spellcheck all of your content. And keep the information accurate and up-to-date. Outdated rates and policies are unprofessional. Consider updating your site more often than is necessary by adding a “What’s New” or “In the News” page to report on recent happenings at the ranch. This will draw return visitors and keep their interest longer. Regular updates also keep your site active with search engines.
- b. **TESTING, TESTING, 1, 2, 3:** Review all of your pages and all of your links. Broken links are unprofessional. Nothing drives away potential customers faster than websites that don’t work (except for those that load too slowly!). As one web design company states, “Your website will ultimately be judged by what your customers can do over what they see.”
- c. **BACKUP:** Keep a backup disc of all of your webpages and images in the event your web server has technical problems.

4. CONGRATULATIONS, YOU’RE DONE! OR, ... ARE YOU?

Your beautiful website is out there on the Internet for everyone to see. The problem is that no one can find it unless they know your exact website address. When prospective clients type a few relevant keywords into their favorite search engine (Google, Yahoo, etc.), your ranch doesn’t appear in the first page of results. Or the second page. And no one’s going to look beyond that. So, what went wrong?

One technical issue not discussed at length here is search engine optimization (SEO). SEO is a phrase used to describe the specific actions you can take when creating your website to ensure that search engines will list your site before other similar ones. Examples of these actions include using the right code to build your site, including the right keywords in the right places on your site, and how you submit your site to the search engines. It may also include paying to have your site listed on search engines.

It’s always best to incorporate SEO features during the initial design/development stage of your site. Otherwise, if you wait until after the site is built, it’s like trying to retrofit your house with energy saving features after you’ve moved in – not impossible, but more expensive and time consuming than if it had been done in the first place. Because SEO requires an extra level of knowledge beyond basic web programming, consider hiring a more experienced programmer who is familiar with SEO as well. It may be money well spent in the long run.

For more information on creating effective websites, search the Internet (lots of free sites have tips such as these) or purchase a book such as the “For Dummies” series by Wiley Publishing, Inc.

Sources: Dreamweaver MX 2004 for Dummies, 2004, Warner, Janine and Susannah Gardner, Wiley Publishing, Inc.; www.dianev.com, © 1998-2005 DianeV. Web Design Studio; www.avtecmedia.com, © Avtec Media, 2005; and other random websites.