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ACCOUNTING FIRM INTERNET SITES THAT WORK (AND THOSE THAT DO NOT)

By *Timothy J. Louwers, William R. Pasewark, and Eric W. Typpo*

The Internet has a proven record in advertising and sales. Can it have the same success for selling accounting services?

Internet sites provide an opportunity for a firm to establish or reinforce their professional identity. It is extremely important to remember that an Internet user's first impression of your firm may be determined by the appearance and content of your site. If a firm's Internet site is updated infrequently, a visitor may conclude that the firm does not make an effort to keep its clients informed. If a firm does not have an Internet site, a prospective client may conclude that the firm is not technologically advanced. The purpose of this article is to allow you to learn through others' experiences in creating and maintaining effective Internet sites.

What Are CPA Firms Putting on the Internet?

We visited 132 accounting firms' Internet sites recognized by Harcourt Brace Professional Publishing as winners of the weekly Top Five Accounting Internet Site award. *Exhibit 1* identifies items commonly found on the accounting firm Internet sites that we visited.

Most CPA firm sites include a description of the firm that details its history and personnel. In addition, almost every site provided a means of contacting firm members by e-mail. Surprisingly, one-quarter of the firms do not provide detailed descriptions of the services they offer or the location of their offices.

Several firms take great effort to make their site a reference point for potential and existing clients' needs. Over half of the firms provide extensive Internet resources that can be accessed from their

INTERNET SITES SHOULD CONTAIN INFORMATION

that attracts users and, more importantly, brings them back again.

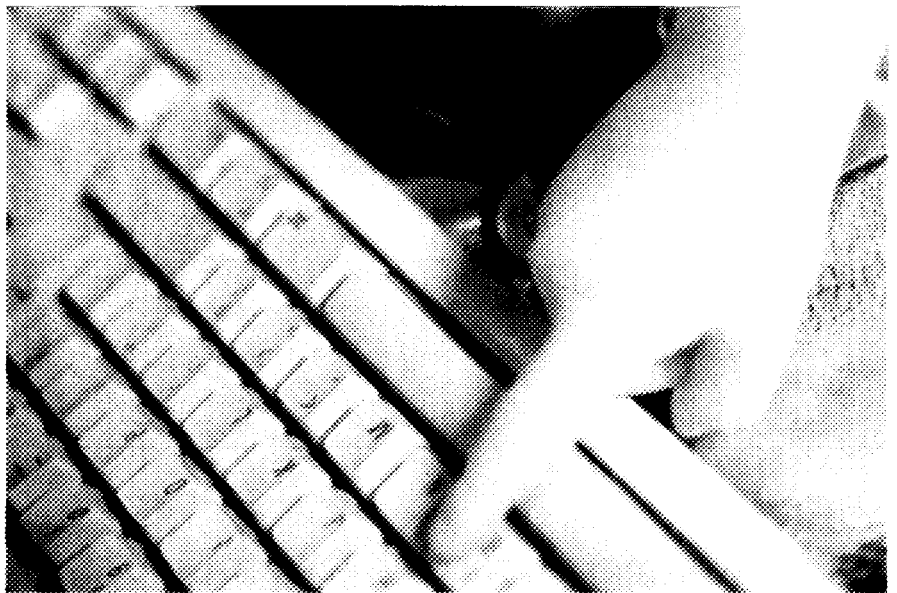
firm's site. These resources include sites such as the AICPA, IRS, and SEC. Blackburn, Childers & Steagall, PLC (www.bcescpa.com) provides downloadable tax forms that can be printed and filed with the IRS. Since the official IRS Internet site is often overwhelmed with users (particularly near tax deadlines), providing an alternative source for tax forms is a good way to entice people to visit your site.

Many of the more innovative firms provide the Internet user with detailed

their Internet site, an additional service that appears to be an outstanding way of maintaining excellent relations with present clients.

Building an Internet Site

The purpose of your homepage is to attract and maintain business. Most marketing studies have shown that customers must be shown a new product or service two to three times before they consider its purchase. Internet sites should contain information that attracts



profiles of firm members, listing their background, credentials, and area of expertise. Some firms invited prospective clients to ask these firm members questions and provided their individual e-mail addresses.

Approximately one-quarter of the firms utilized their Internet site for staff recruiting. Listing firm openings on an Internet site can be a cost-effective way of attracting highly skilled applicants. These sites typically included a description of job activities and information on how to contact the firm concerning these opportunities. One firm took the additional step of listing client openings on

users and, more importantly, brings them back again. The essentials of building and maintaining an Internet site are shown in *Exhibit 2*.

Internet Site Appearance

Graphics are the colorful pictures and moving icons that can make a site inviting. For example, the Frazier & Deeter, LLC site (www.frazier-deeter.com) features, in quick succession, a picture of Al Capone and the crimes that he "got away with." Finally, the site notes that he didn't get away with tax evasion—his prison mug shot then appears. The site notes that this message was brought cour-

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**EXHIBIT 1
WHAT FIRMS PUT ON THE INTERNET**

Item	Percent
Email addresses to contact the firm	87.9%
Description of the firm—"Who are we?"	87.1
Identification of services offered by the firm	75.0
Location of the firm	71.2
Links to sources outside the firm	55.3
Profiles of firm members	53.0
Statement of the firm philosophy or mission	40.2
Tax or business tip of the month/week/day	36.4
Employment opportunities within the firm	27.3
Online newsletter	27.3
Guest book (for client leads)	26.5
Instructions on obtaining products/literature offered by the firm	13.6
Description of seminars offered by the firm	11.4
Newsletter subscription information	10.6
Calendar of important tax dates	8.3
Invitation to "ask the expert"	7.6
Counter of the number of Internet site visitors	7.6
Internet links to clients	6.1
Comments or testimonials from clients	5.3
Humor and entertainment	4.6
Disclaimers	3.0

tesy of the "notoriously honest accountants of Frazier & Deeter, LLC." Several firms allow the user to listen to comments by partners or humorous welcomes (for example, www.ozemail.com/~dutch).

Under some circumstances, technological features might prevent some users from accessing or viewing your Internet site effectively. For users with limited technology, Internet sites may take several minutes to access and download. Some firm sites have been created by Internet consulting firms that use state-of-the-art technology. Unfortunately, Internet users that do not have access to the same technology may be frustrated and move on. When creating, modifying, or updating your site, make sure that the average

user will be able to view it. The best solution is to offer the alternative of a text-only version for the most basic user.

Prospective clients are visiting a site for information and not entertainment. Although you may have the ability to provide high-technology features, the needs of potential clients should take precedence over a flashy presentation. As a general rule, graphics should be simple, but attractive.

Internet Site Content

The most important aspect of Internet site content is selling your firm's strong points. For example, if your firm has extensive experience in dealing with a particular industry (for example, health

care) or performing a certain service (valuation, regulatory compliance) that fact should be made clear when the Internet user first enters your site.

Once users visit your site, your objective is to obtain their name, understand their needs, and offer a solution to their problems. Prospective clients' names and needs can be identified by several means. For example, firms use industry surveys, feedback forms, and newsletter subscription sign-ups to obtain names and e-mail addresses for follow-up. The best method we found, though, was an "Ask Us Questions" page (for example, www.cpas/docs.com) that encourages users to submit questions along with an e-mail address for a firm member to follow up with a reply. This method also provides a means for the firm to identify specific needs for the potential client that may result in further business for the firm. Other firms list firm members' personal e-mail addresses and specialty descriptions; site visitors are then able to direct questions to the appropriate individuals.

Disclosing the firm's location is also critical. For potential clients looking for an accounting firm close at hand, not disclosing location may lose you business. For example, one firm provides a live "skycam" picture of Atlanta, closely associating the firm with the Atlanta business community (www.frazier-deeter.com/links.html). Other firms provide interactive maps and directions (for example, www.cpas.net). Surprisingly, many firms do not disclose their location on their Internet site. Given the global implications of the Internet and its ability to facilitate business from very distant locations, some must feel that disclosing location may discourage potential clients. For example, some accounting firms are providing tax services directly through the Internet. Location, in this context, may not be important.

Finally, access to important information can be limited if excessive mouse clicks are needed to explore your Internet site. To make your site more user friendly, consider putting a menu on your homepage that lists all the important information contained in the site. Not only will potential clients be able to directly access the information they are seeking with one mouse click, but they will also be more likely to spot something

EXHIBIT 2 ESSENTIALS OF BUILDING AND MAINTAINING AN INTERNET SITE

Getting your Internet site started

- Choose a reputable designer.
- Remember that the site is for the benefit of the client.
- Use simple but attractive graphics.
- Emphasize content over bells and whistles.
- Sell your firm's strong points.
- Provide a means for contacting you.

Accessing your Internet site

- Choose a provider that can handle your needs.
- Select a logical Internet address (URL).
- Make your Internet site easy to navigate.

Maintaining your Internet site

- Advertise your Internet site.
- Update on a timely basis.
- Manage the site from within the firm.
- Follow up requests immediately.

else that interests them if it isn't buried behind three or four other pages.

Accessing the Internet Site

Gaining access to your Internet site depends on the capabilities of the Internet service provider, the identification of your site by search engines, and the organization of information in your site. An Internet service provider (ISP) should be selected based on the expected volume of visitors. It is important to choose an ISP that has sufficient bandwidth to handle your traffic. Potential clients may lose patience with an Internet site that takes several minutes to download due to insufficient server resources and move on to another Internet site.

In addition to informing the Internet user, the content of an Internet site can also affect access to the site. Words contained in the Internet site will determine whether it will be identified by a search engine. By using keywords relevant to your firm's services in the Internet site title, you increase the probability that a search engine will return your uniform resource locator (URL), i.e., your Internet address, to a potential client.

Too many firms that we visited had moved their sites from the addresses pro-

vided by our source and left us staring at error messages. Potential clients unable to find your Internet site because of an outdated link will be left with a negative impression. By registering a unique domain name for the firm, changing Internet providers can be invisible to those accessing your site. For example, William F. Gurrie & Co., Ltd., has a URL of www.gurrie.com. Once the domain name is registered, the firm can keep the same URL regardless of the server that the site is located on, so a change in ISPs is invisible to visitors. An additional benefit of using the firm's name in the URL is that it is easier for current or potential customers to remember the URL. Alternatively, if you don't choose a unique domain name for your firm, choose a well-established ISP that has a history of providing quality service so that you won't have to change hosts. Finally, don't make your Internet address too long or complicated. Longer URLs are harder to remember and more prone to fall victim to typing errors.

One way to increase visits to your site is to actively promote it. You should include your firm's URL on business cards, stationery, and advertisements the same way you would a phone number. Well-advertised Internet sites have the poten-

tial to bring in new clients and reinforce loyalty from existing clients.

Finally, and most importantly, you must follow up on leads derived from the Internet. The primary purpose of establishing an Internet site is to generate and maintain a client base. If e-mail requests and inquiries are postponed or ignored, the benefits are lost. □

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For another how-to guide to firm websites, please see the November 1998 CPA Journal, which featured an article and accompanying website (www.richmond.edu/~walden/cpaweb) by authors Paul M. Clikeman, L. Murphy Smith, and W. Darrell Walden

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