

2. Website

Creating Your Brand's Online Presence

Why get your brand online?

Like other aspects of your food business, creating your brand's online presence requires planning that can benefit from a strategic approach. Before jumping into a website builder or the latest social channel, consider your objectives for your business' online presence.



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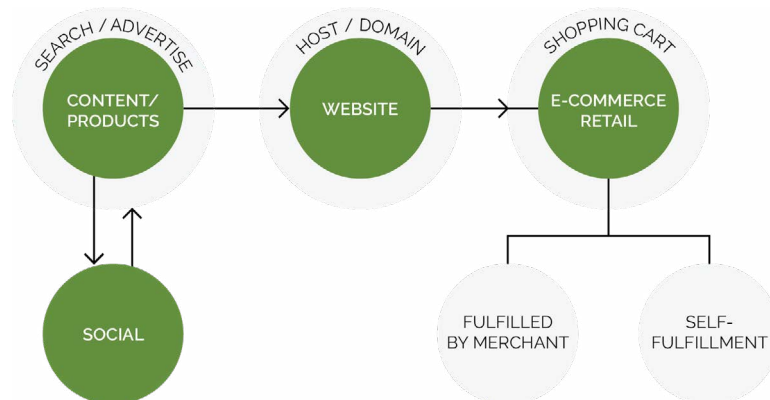
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There are a number of logical reasons to be online including:

- Telling your story. Sharing information that builds connection between your brand and consumers including the inspiration and people behind the business or a social cause supported by the business.
- Providing information about your brand including product descriptions, nutrition and ingredient information, recipes or usage suggestions, where to buy and how to contact your company.
- Make connections and build community. Do you want to foster and maintain individual conversations with consumers? Or foster connection between your consumers?
- Selling product. Whether through an online retailer, directly on your company website or other web-driven distribution models to build sales and distribution.



Addressing these issues takes an interconnected matrix of tools. Depending on your business' needs, you may turn to some or all of these tools and do so in a number of different sequences. No single right path exists, rather it's important to be knowledgeable of the tools that will help create the desired end result.

Making Your Website Work Harder

A company website is the most common online communication tool and it's rare for a company not to have one. But the challenge for food companies is to make their website a marketing tool rather than just something that exists because all businesses seem to have one. Two key questions can ensure your website is an effective marketing tool.



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1. What business objectives does the website need to achieve?
2. What do potential and current customers/consumers need from our website?

Considering these two questions helps develop a website that is valuable to both the company and its customers.

What business objectives does the website need to achieve?

Websites can accomplish or support a number of business objectives. Defining how your website should impact these objectives will focus the site and the resources you use to develop content. For example, you might want your site to:



TELL A BRAND STORY

Tell a brand story that makes a compelling connection with the audience. This may be particularly important to social enterprises or where the inspiration behind the brand is rooted in the history of the founder or is highly relevant to the target audience.



PROVIDE INFORMATION

Provide consumers (and potentially retailers) with information including product assortment, nutritional information, ingredients, recipes, usage suggestions, where to buy, how to become a distributor, and contact information for the company should the consumer have a question or concern.



COLLECT INFORMATION

Collect user feedback or contact information for your marketing database.



PROMOTE

Communicate brand or product news, promotions or events.



SELL

Enable purchases through a shopping cart, connection to third-party online retailers or pointing consumers to brick and mortar retail locations.

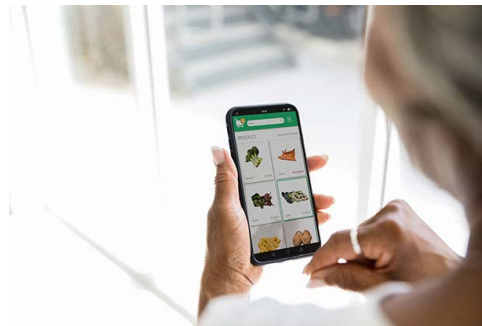
What do potential and current customers/consumers need from our website?

While the question above is inwardly directed, thinking about what visitors to your website want from it may be even more valuable. Think about why they're visiting the site and what information and activities are most important to them.

There are two basic concepts that guide this thinking:
User Interface (UI) and User Experience (UX).

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USER INTERFACE (UI)



User Interface is the way in which the user interacts with the website. This might include whether your consumers are likely to access your site on a desktop vs mobile device; or whether or not a shopping cart or search function is included front and center.

USER EXPERIENCE (UX)



User Experience is the sum of emotional and cognitive interactions that a consumer has with a product or service, and in this case its website. Is it visually appealing? How easy is it to use or navigate? How does it make the user feel? The following "honeycomb matrix" demonstrates many of the considerations of User Experience. Thinking about each element of your website with these considerations in mind can help improve UX.

Developing your website or e-commerce offering should be done from a UI/UE perspective. That is to say, to think through each piece of content and each step of navigation from the perspective of the consumers that will be visiting and using the site; and to ultimately create a site that maximizes the user's enjoyment and ease of use. From a content perspective, this means organizing content in a way that consumers would logically think about it or positioning the most sought-after information first. From an e-commerce perspective, this would include how shoppers are able to review information when considering the product or minimizing the number of clicks necessary to purchase the product.

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Content Considerations

Beyond selling products and communicating basic product information, one of the most powerful uses of a brand's website is story telling. A website can provide consumers a genuine representation of the brand, allows them to foster personal connections, can begin to move consumers toward purchasing products and develop an affinity for the brand.

Your brand story could contain any number of facets of your brand including business history or the inspiration behind the business, its mission and vision, how you interact with your marketplace and consumers and how your products meet consumers' needs.

When thinking about telling your story, it's useful to consider your brand's positioning statement; or write one if you've not already done so. A basic framework for positioning is:

For **[the target]**, this brand is the one **[product frame of reference]** that provides **[unique benefit]** because **[reason to believe]**.

Think about your business' target consumer, what your product does for them that no other product does (or what problem does it solve) and what are the facts or data points that you would use to support the claim to providing the benefit. This framework can lead to creating website content that uniquely supports your brand.

A Hypothetical Example:

Consider the example for an imaginary local juice company, Great Northern Farms, making unique juice blends in a vertically integrated operation.

For **health and flavor seekers**, Great Northern Farms is the one **juice blend** that provides **moments of daily adventure** because **our "juice-ologists" create a unique rainbow of juice blends that deliver a rich source of vitamins from organic vegetables grown on our farms in Minnesota.**

✓ Rather than target a specific demographic, or even all juice drinkers, Great Northern Farms is made for people looking for healthy flavorful choices.

✓ Great Northern Farms' core benefit is an emotional one: to offer moments of daily adventure. Often emotional benefits create a stronger positioning than product focused ones.

✓ Their claim is supported by the facts that they have an expert creating the products and they come from Minnesota organic vegetables.

✓ The frame of reference is juice blends; creating a distinction for who they compete against.

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Some other key considerations for telling your brand story:



Your mission, vision and brand values.

What motivated me to start my business? Why does our business exist? How do we contribute to our customers or to the world? What's important to our business and is that sentiment shared by our customers? Determine your brands' "why, how and what" and share it to make a powerful connection with consumers.



Understand how your product fits into your story.

The brand story and product should naturally reinforce one another. Is your product quality and price point reflective of other brand image elements? Is the origin of your business clearly connected to how your product helps consumers solve a problem or how it makes them feel?



Understand your target audience.

Not only who they are from a demographic standpoint, but who you see as your ideal customer and how your product will enhance their daily life.

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These Minnesota food businesses do a great job of telling their story through their website:



CITY GIRL COFFEE

This coffee roaster is dedicated to supporting women-owned coffee growers.



SEVEN SUNDAYS

A certified B-corp making breakfast cereals and focused on regenerative agriculture and small grains.



GRANDMA'S GOURMET

A local small batch food manufacturer that puts homemade and local ingredients at the forefront of their offerings.



NORTH MALLOW

This gourmet marshmallow maker promises a better marshmallow and tells their background story to engage consumers.



JONNY POPS

A frozen treat manufacturer that quickly tells their story of ingredients, taste and kindness.



STEP ONE FOODS

A provider of foods clinically proven to improve health demonstrates how their product is science-backed.



PEACE COFFEE

A local coffee roaster that does a great job of providing usage tips and connecting their consumers to their growers.

Resources

For more insights on brand storytelling visit:

- [Content Marketing Institute](#)
- [Kerry Digest Blog](#)
- [Food Dive News](#)

For more information on UX/UI visit:

- [Adobe XD Ideas](#)
- [Guru99](#)
- [Prototypr.io](#)
- [TestingTime](#)

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Technical Considerations

When developing a website, entrepreneurs have three primary approaches along a spectrum of complexity from “do-it-yourself” sites to fully customized built and hosted sites, to hybrids falling somewhere in between.

Which approach is best for your business is a matter of time, cost and experience, both in initial development and ongoing site maintenance.



1. “Do-it-Yourself (DIY)” platforms

The easiest and least expensive way to establish a website is through one of many “do-it-yourself” web platforms including web.com, wix.com, weebly.com and godaddy.com. These services provide a turnkey solution offering users a domain name, hosting platform, customizable design templates and a variety of plug-in apps to enable activities such as e-commerce. These site-builders often provide access to stock photography as well as enable the user to upload their own images. These platforms leverage a “WYSIWYG” (what you see is what you get) approach to design, meaning an individual with no technical skills can design a website.

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2. Professionally designed websites:

On the opposite end of the spectrum are custom designed websites. These sites require selection of a website host and custom development of the site architecture; and as such, will most often require assistance from one or more professionals to help create and manage the website. Because of their complexity and the resources necessary, they are often a more expensive option. Some of the key considerations and resources in this approach include:

- A web hosting platform — the electronic system that will house the website.
- A domain name.
- A web designer or team knowledgeable in user experience, site design and programming languages to manage the development of the site. These individuals (or others like them) can handle ongoing maintenance of the site once live.
- Content resources to create copy, images or video for the site itself.

3. Hybrid model:

Many food companies find their needs lie somewhere in between the two models described above and WordPress provides a solution. From its beginnings as a blogging site, WordPress has evolved into the dominant website platform powering 39% of all websites. It is a highly customizable, but easy to use platform popular with many small and medium sized businesses. Similar to do it yourself (DIY) tools, WordPress offers customizable templates, though the freedom to edit is far greater than with DIY sites. With that freedom comes a slightly more complicated programming interface. Unlike DIY sites, a WordPress site requires the user to host and maintain the site on a separate web hosting platform. A WordPress site, while relatively straight-forward, requires some level of experience to manage efficiently. A food business may want to outsource the management of a WordPress site if they do not have the technical abilities, interest or time to learn.

Resources

For food company templates, visit:

- [Wix Food Templates](#)

For more information on starting a food business website, visit:

- [The Strikingly Blog: Food Websites](#)

The blog sections of DIY website builders offer some great guidance. Here's some of our favorites:

- [Wix Support: Getting Started](#)
- [Web.com: Website Checklist](#)
- [Web.com: Building a Website](#)

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External Support Resources

While a solo entrepreneur or a small internal marketing team can handle many online marketing and e-commerce efforts, at times a food business may want to turn to external resources. Below are a few of the external resources available to help create and support an online presence.



COPYWRITERS

Copywriters are professionals that provide creative copy writing for websites as well as other marketing efforts. They can help a food business create compelling headline, informative brand stories, product descriptions and marketing content. Many are well versed in writing for a number of different styles, but it's advisable to review their prior work to understand if their style is consistent with the positioning you want to establish for your brand. Partners hired to do this work need to understand your story, and you need to be sure their words convey authenticity.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEOGRAPHY

Photography and Videography are critical to communicating in highly visual online media. The DIY website platforms offer limited stock photography or food businesses can use stock photography from resources like istockphoto.com or shutterstock.com. Often a photographer or videographer is necessary to create proprietary images for the food business. When looking for resources, it's important to consider the type of imagery you're seeking. Some photographers specialize in shooting food shots for editorial content while others may specialize in packaging or even lifestyle.

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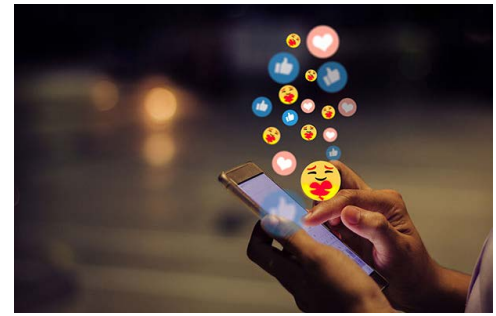
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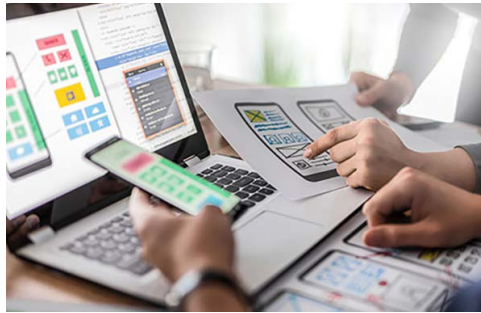
WEBSITE DEVELOPERS

Website Developers are a team or individual that manages the technical side of creating and maintaining a website. They consider the user experience, create a website wireframe, or skeletal framework, to organize content and ultimately build the digital assets that become the website. Most developers will also offer ongoing website maintenance.



SOCIAL MEDIA SPECIALISTS

Social Media Specialists sometimes also called content specialists, are marketing professionals specializing in creating content for the various social media platforms. They are skilled in writing content and curating images in a manner appropriate for each channel. While it's tempting for small food businesses to want to manage their social media themselves, it can be very time-consuming and an outside resource may free the business owner to do other things while providing consistent focus to the social efforts.



GRAPHIC DESIGNERS

Graphic Designers can create logos, drawings and icons for websites and other marketing materials, but are also experts in laying out attractive and persuasive documents. They can be leveraged alongside a website developer or to help the food business design a website through one of the DIY web platforms.



FOOD STYLISTS

Food Stylists are a lesser known but critical resource to the photography and videography process. A food stylist is skilled at preparing and plating foods to create successful images. They work in partnership with the photographer. Many photographers have food stylists they work with regularly or can suggest options.

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Resources

Selecting professional assistance can be challenging for food businesses. Several sources for finding these resources exist:

- Networking with other food businesses is a great place to find vetted resources.
- Searching online for the above job titles will also yield many options. When considering resources found online, consider the type of clients they serve and seek out those with expertise in food, if not your specific product category.
- Reach out to local colleges and universities to find out if there are student groups or classes that are looking for real world problems/activities to work on.
- The **Grow North Resource Database and Forge North MSP Startup Compass** highlights organizations that support growing food businesses, both for the marketing roles listed above but also a broad array of other support services.
- The **Minnesota Department of Agriculture** offers marketing support to Minnesota food companies, including cost-sharing for e-commerce related expenses. Their resource does not provide connection to service providers.
- The Minnesota chapter of the **Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)** provides a searchable database of public relations professionals.
- The **Minnesota Council of Non-Profits** is an industry organization. Their website contains a searchable database of business resources including marketing and e-commerce service providers.
- **Foodexport.org** focuses on helping food business access foreign markets. They've created an **11-module training course** to help food businesses navigate selling products internationally. Additionally, in the current COVID-limited environment, they offer online consultations to guide food companies in market introductions.
- The **Twin Cities Collective Academy** is a paid education series focused on helping entrepreneurs improve their online marketing skills. While the series is not specifically food-focused, it may provide deeper engagement on the topics covered in this resource.