

5 Things to Consider Before You Design Your Website

Does the word “website” terrify you? Does the thought of researching website designers make you cringe? Does the thought of designing your own website seem laughable—impossible even? You’ve come to the right place.

As an unpublished author, I knew a website could help my career, but I wasn’t sure how, considering I didn’t have a book to promote. Plus, every time I thought of websites, nausea would bubble up, and I’d slam the door shut to the anxiety-producing thoughts whirling around in my head.

But it bothered me that I didn’t have a website when so many unpublished authors had terrific ones. I decided to swallow my fears, grab a barf bag, and make some decisions.

I knew I wanted my site to work long-term. I asked myself what I wanted it to accomplish. The answer? I wanted my site to promote me as a writer and, eventually, promote the books I write.

After studying the five areas below, I decided to design my own website. The process both terrified and excited me. It’s not for everyone, but if you have average computer skills and are willing to update your own site, you might want to consider it.

1. COST

A website can range anywhere from free (yes, there are ways to get a free website) to several thousand dollars.

One free option is to use WordPress (a blog tool) to create your site, also Blogger offers a gadget to add pages to your blog. A quick search on the Internet will bring up a slew of articles on the subject. One drawback: your url will not include *www*, thus making it less easy for people to find your site when typing it into a search engine. There may be ways to get around this. Again, an Internet search would provide the answer.

Another no-expense option is to use a free web-hosting service. Plenty of companies offer this as a free service. Research them and pay attention to the following. Will your domain name be an extension of the web-hosting company’s? For example: www.webcompany/yourname.com. Will the site display ads from the web-hosting company? Do the features include e-mail? Are the file-types restricted?

You want to have a professional-looking site, and you want visitors to find you. Both will be difficult if your domain name includes another company in it, and you don't want ads selling diapers on your site for obvious reasons.

Are you writing under a pen name? Register the domain name and design your website to reflect it. Make sure your domain name is structured like this: www.yourname.com. This isn't the time

to register a cute or vague domain name like www.lovetowrite.com or www.icecreamsurprise.com. After all, how do readers find their favorite authors? By typing the author's name into a search engine.

***A note on domain names. The most desirable domain name includes *www* (world wide web). When you have *www* in front of your name, search engines will be more likely to find you.

Also, don't waste your time setting up a site that will have to be completely gutted when you're published. Set it up correctly now to save time later.

A mildly expensive option is to design your own site using a web-hosting service such as **Yahoo! WebHosting**, **GoDaddy**, etc... They offer similar plans in terms of expense and features, so it's really a personal preference on what service to use. Expect to pay between \$75/year and \$150/year. For this expense, you will get a domain name www.yourname.com, a WYSIWYG design program, 24 hour customer support, more e-mail addresses and storage than you'll probably ever need, statistic tools to track your visitors, and a nifty button to submit your site to the top search engines on a daily basis.

I would not recommend trying to design your site using only html code unless you're a master at it. WYSIWYG stands for What You See Is What You Get, meaning you just point and click, and these programs take the pain out of design.

A more expensive way to go is to purchase a WYSIWYG design program such as **DreamWeaver**, design the site yourself, and pay a minimal fee for your domain name. Drawback? These programs aren't cheap. The latest version of **DreamWeaver** lists for \$399. Also, check the requirements needed to publish your site. Will you need to pay for a web-hosting service in addition to the domain name and program?

If you hire someone to design your site, the expense varies. If you know someone, you may be able to get a fabulous deal on a site design. A college student might be interested in setting up your site for very little money. However, if you hire a professional designer, expect to pay anywhere between \$500 and several thousand dollars.

There are things to consider if you go this route. Do you want to update your own site or do you want to pay someone to update it for you? Keep in mind--you'll still have to get the information to them. Will there be additional charges if you decide to add pages later? What will happen if you decide to terminate your service with them? Research several companies to determine what each offers, and ask your friends for recommendations.

2. UPDATES

How often will you update your site? Do you want to create it and leave it as-is? Or do you plan on updating it sporadically as you think of things to add? Would you feel comfortable with updating it on a monthly basis? A weekly basis?

If you plan on creating the site and leaving it alone until some point in the future when you'll have more to add (such as your first book cover!), concentrate on creating a professional looking **Home** page. A head shot, brief bio, and a method of contacting you should suffice. Do

you blog? Include a link to it. Make your website an informational tool for anyone interested in your work. Don't include anything that will be obsolete in a few months. For example, "The piles of snow in my front yard..." will not make sense in the middle of summer, and "My latest book will be finished in July 1997!" makes it obvious you aren't updating regularly.

If you plan on updating it sporadically, please reconsider. A poorly designed, rarely updated site will not impress editors or agents, nor will it attract repeat visitors. Either decide to put up a basic, leave-alone site, or update it on a regular basis. You don't want your website to hurt your reputation.

If you do plan on updating it on a regular basis, decide how often. What day will you publish your updates? The first of the month? The first day of each week? How far in advance will you have to type in your updates in order to meet this? Give yourself a minimum of 24 hours from when you type in your updates to when you publish them so you will catch any mistakes. Editing is important when updating your website. Post your best work on it.

3. CONTENT

Content? What content? I'm not published yet!

Hold on there. Plenty of unpublished writers have websites. Check them out. Think about what you like about their sites.

Basic elements of an author's website:

The **Home** page. (If you're not updating the site regularly, this will be your biography page also. If you are updating regularly, post your updates here.)

Your **Home** page will feature the header of your site. This should include your name, or pen name, and your brand if you have one. If you don't have a brand, include the genre of books you write. Make it clear what your site is about. Don't make a visitor guess what your site is promoting. Spell it out for them!

The header of my site reads:

Jill Kemerer
sweet, emotional, sparkling romance
Jill Kemerer writes Christian romance novels.

If someone accidentally found my site, they would not think that I'm selling bathrobes nor that I write dark paranormal books.

The **Home** page is the first page a visitor will see. Don't expect readers to click through your site to find your updates—keep your fresh material here. Also, don't make them guess how often you update; post the date front and center. If you update monthly, put the current month and year above your new material. If you're updating more often, put the actual date above the information.

What will you update about? That's up to you. You might want to discuss the progress of your latest book. You could write a personal essay, interview an author, or write a book review. The

possibilities are endless. You don't have to promote a published book to have a successful website.

If you're setting up your site as a promotional tool for future books, keep the content based on you, your writing, or writing in general. This isn't the place to include a photo album from last Christmas. However, don't be afraid to include a recipe if you're a fabulous cook or a playlist of tunes if you adore music. It's okay to let your personality shine through, as long as it doesn't take away from the overall goal of promoting yourself as a writer.

A **Biography** page should be included (this can be called About Me, or any other name you prefer). It can be short or long, but include your writing history, any organizations you belong to, previous publishing history (if any), and the genres you write. If you haven't posted a picture of yourself on your home page, post one here, and think twice before putting up the picture of you in your cut-offs last summer.

A **Contact** link or e-mail address will allow any visitor to contact you.

If you have a **Blog**, link it to your site and vice-versa.

You can have as many or as few pages as you want. Again, look at other author's sites for ideas. Jot down any features you like; you can always add more pages later. It's your website--do what you want! Mine started out with a **Home** page, a **Biography** page, a link to my **Blog**, and a **Contact** e-mail. A few months later, I decided to add a **Links** page.

This month I added an **Articles** page and a **Proposals** page. I've seen other authors include a **Fun Stuff** page which lists their favorite books, television shows, candy, etc... I've also seen a **My Place** page with information about where the author lives. I've seen a **Meet the Authors** page featuring podcasts of interviews the author conducted.

4. VISUALS

What colors are you drawn to? What colors represent your writing? When you look at other author's sites, which colors please you? Try to come up with a palette of several complementary colors, or, if you prefer to stay with one or two, find several shades and depths. Look at home magazines for ideas. They often give suggestions of what colors go well together.

What theme represents you as a writer? Do you have a brand? Do you know what genre of books you write? Spend time analyzing what elements are always present in your books (even if you write more than one genre) and play with these to come up with a brand. If coming up with a brand is beyond you at this point, simply describe the books you write. "Sally Susie writes contemporary women's fiction."

What about visuals? Do you want a picture or your headshot in your header? Do you like sites that have buttons for links or just words for links? Do you like the navigation bars at the top, bottom, or one of the sides? Look at other websites to narrow down the layouts you like. Model your site after the one you like best. I'm not saying to copy it; analyze what you like about the site and incorporate those features into yours.

5. PROFESSIONALISM

A website is a key promotional tool for you as an author whether you're published or not. When you have a website as an unpublished author, you can include your domain name in your contact information when you're querying agents and editors. They may look at your site; they may not; either way they know you have a website.

Let's say they do look at your site. You want them to be impressed. If you decide to update regularly, follow through. Also, you might want to put a small line at the bottom of the page that tells when you update the site. Design the site to be easy to navigate. Be honest with yourself and ask for input from friends: does it look as if it was slapped together by a third grader? Edit before you update to insure there are no grammatical errors. Verify every link works (it only takes one wrong character to have a broken link).

A website can impress an editor or agent--or it can underwhelm. A good website doesn't have to be fancy. It does have to be clear, well-done, and professional looking.

In conclusion, a website doesn't have to cost a fortune to do the job right. If you don't want to update it very often, you can put up a basic information page. If you do update it regularly, you'll attract more visitors. The website should clearly state who you are, what you write, and your writing background. The visuals should reflect who you are as a writer. If you write thrillers, an editor will be confused if the website is mint green and pink with flowers spattered everywhere. Above all, strive to make the site as professional as possible. This means no broken links, no confusing content, no grammatical errors.

I hope this helps anyone who dreads the thought of putting together a website. Yes, it's a lot of work whether you design it yourself or hire it out, but publishers expect authors to have websites as soon as they're published. Do you really want to deal with the stress of starting a website when you're knee-deep in contracts, edits, and art department forms? I don't think so! The bulk of the work involved with a website takes place in the design stage. Once your site is up and running, it requires much less time and effort. And what an accomplishment to see your own website on the Internet!

What are you waiting for? Start designing your website!

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