Using the Internet to Enhance Direct Market Sales of Seafood

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INTRODUCTION

In today's market, not having an Internet presence is like trying to conduct business without a telephone. A significant number of Americans, younger people especially, are accustomed to searching for information or shopping on the Internet. For the seafood dealers and retailers who want to connect more directly with the public, a website is practically a necessity. Many small business owners, however, seem intimidated by Internet technology, possibly because they do not understand it. This can lead them to underestimate the Internet's commercial potential.

Market research by the seafood educational organization Carteret Catch shows consumers prefer local seafood over imports when they visit the coast, but they do not always know where to find local products in season. Furthermore, consumers say it is important for them to know they are supporting local fishermen. An Internet presence can help dealers and retailers put a "face on the seafood" and reach a greater number of potential customers to expand their businesses.

This brochure is designed to introduce you to working with an experienced designer to create a website that promotes your business and highlights seasonal inventory.

WHAT IS A WEBSITE?

A website is a set of interconnected webpages that are identified by a **domain name**, such as *captjimsseafood.com*. In a sense, a website is like a book, and the title of the book being discussed here is "Capt. Jim's Seafood." Webpages are similar to pages in a book, except they can contain videos in addition to words and photographs. Unlike books, however, the webpages in websites are maintained and updated electronically by a person, group or an organization.

Webpages are written in a computer language called HTML. People navigate webpages by clicking on **hyperlinks**, which connect either to other areas of information on a website, or to an entirely different website. Websites are held on **servers**, which are special computers that hold the text, images or videos contained in webpages.

A **web browser** is a tool that allows you and your customers to search for websites and view them on a computer. Examples of common web browsers include "Internet Explorer" and "Firefox."

DECIDING THE PURPOSE OF YOUR WEBSITE

Developing your website is like creating a newspaper or television advertisement. You have to know the kind of customer you are trying to reach and the kind of information about your products you want to share with your target audience.

The sample website used in this brochure belongs to Marc Smith, the owner and operator of a retail seafood business in Morehead City, NC. He sells primarily fresh fish and shellfish caught by local fishermen, but he also offers frozen Maine lobster tails, King Crab, Snow Crab, mussels and canned chopped clams. Smith offers non-seafood items such as dessert pies, seasonings, cookbooks, shirts and hats. Though he sells some seafood wholesale to local restaurants, Smith's target audience is the general public and tourists.

Websites are built to convey information with both imagery and words, offering business owners tremendous flexibility to craft promotions that inform as well as entertain. To generate ideas on how he wanted his website to appear, Smith reviewed seafood businesses, primarily based in North Carolina, with a web presence. He evaluated each website and noted the design features that appealed to him.

Seafood Processors:

- Carolina Catfish Classics, Ayden, NC: *www.cccatfish.com*
- Fresher than Fresh, Gastonia, NC: *www.fresherthanfresh.com*
- Inland Seafood Company, Charlotte, NC: *www.inlandseafood.com*
- Pamlico Packing Company, Grantsboro, NC: *www.bestseafood.com/main.htm*
- Quality Seafood Market, Inc., Elizabeth City, NC: *www.nextdayseafood.com*
- Sea Safari, Ltd., Belhaven, NC: *www.seasafari.com*

- Sunburst Trout Company, Canton, NC: *www.sunbursttrout.com*
- Sysco Foods, Houston, TX: *www.sysco.com*
- Wanchese Fish Company, Wanchese, NC: *www.wanchese.com*

Restaurants:

- The Bistro-by-the-Sea, Morehead City, NC: *www.bistro-by-the-sea.com*
- The Sanitary Fish Market & Restaurant, Morehead City, NC: *www.SanitaryFishMarket.com*

Smith decided on a single-page website because a one-page site was most affordable. He took digital photographs of his business, roadside sign and seafood counter, and then e-mailed them to the designer. A minimum resolution of 72 dpi (dots per inch) is needed for digital photographs to have maximum clarity on a website. Almost all digital cameras can generate photographs having this resolution; however, if you believe your customers will print any portion of your website that includes photographs, the minimum resolution you will need is 300 dpi to ensure the printed photographs are extremely clear.

The first design version *(see page 4)* featured three photos on the right side of the webpage that displayed the roadside sign and display counters with fresh seafood and frozen desserts. The text listed inventory without pricing because Smith's wholesale costs changed frequently during the year, and he did not want to pay a webmaster to keep his prices current on the website.

The second version *(see page 4)* displayed photos of the business, the roadside sign, fishing vessels, a display counter and close-ups of shrimp and mackerel steaks at the top of the webpage. The left side of the webpage featured text describing the seafood. The right side of the webpage featured a boxed area entitled "There's More," which listed Smith's inventory of frozen seafood, non-seafood products and clothing. Smith wanted to promote his membership in Carteret Catch, so a hyperlink was added to take customers to the Carteret Catch website if they wanted to learn more about the local commercial seafood industry. The background color was lightened so the shadow image of an Atlantic blue crab was more visible to viewers.

In the third and final version *(see page 4)*, the local seafood inventory was organized according to seasonal availability. The species highlighted in bold denote the commodities that are most popular among consumers, according to three regional market research surveys that were conducted by and on behalf of Carteret Catch. A hyperlink was added in the lower right corner of the page to take customers to a website entitled *Mariner's Menu*, which offers consumers kitchen-tested preparations for North Carolina seafood.

SELECTING A WEB DESIGNER

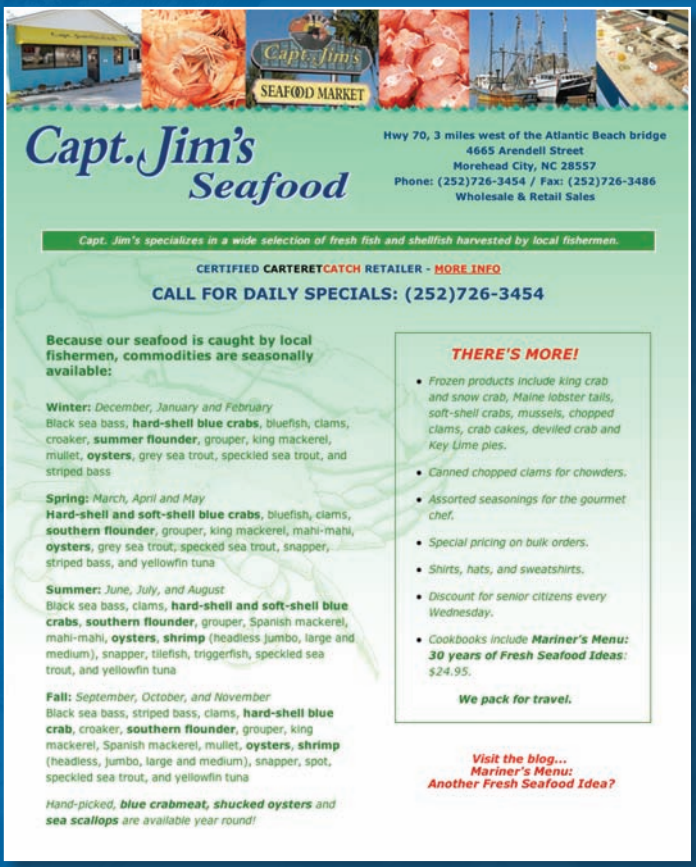
Although many people, including friends and family, believe they are talented website designers, consider hiring a professional who has *commercial* experience. Ask for examples of their work to review. Also ask business owners whose websites you like for referrals.

DESIGN FORMATS

Top left:
Initial design

Top right:
Adjusted design

Right:
Final Website
In the final design, local seafood inventory was organized according to seasonal availability.



Your website will be a reflection of you and your business, so you will need to be satisfied and comfortable about how it represents both. Make sure your designer has done work that fits your personal tastes or provide your designer examples of other websites you like so he or she understands your preferences.

When negotiating a fee based on the design characteristics you want, ask what a typical price is for a single-page or multiple-page website. Also, ask how fees are affected by including photographs and/or video.

Communication between you and your designer is essential for a successful website design. The more information that is shared at the beginning of the design process, the better the chances your designer will create a site that meets your needs. Too much direction from you may frustrate your designer, but too little input could create confusion for your designer and disappointment for you.

It is a good idea for your website to support any of your other advertising efforts and vice versa. All of the pieces become part of your overall marketing strategy, so be sure your web designer is aware of any other promotional materials you are using, such as logos, brochures or print advertisements.

FORM VS. FUNCTION

We've already covered what a website is technically, but the true function is to provide information. A good website does this in a clear, easily navigated and, hopefully, memorable way through its design. Form and function go hand-in-hand — that's why choosing an experienced commercial web designer is so important.

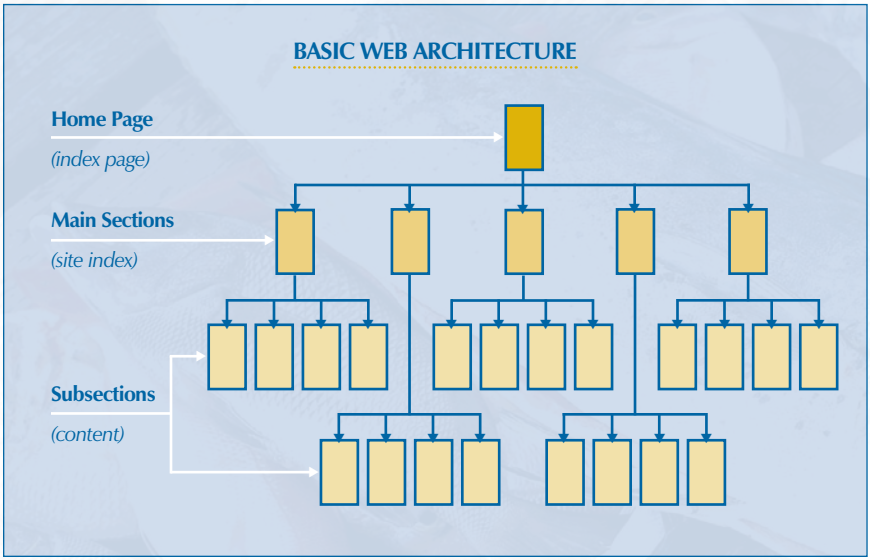
Content is your foundation:

- What do you want to say and how can it be clearly organized? Be judicious in using words, images or videos so the information that is important about your business and products will be noticed quickly by your viewers.
- Do different themes or ideas about your business or seafood warrant their own section on one webpage or should they be profiled on separate pages?
- What kind of graphics — such as illustrations, photographs or videos — could communicate your information better than words? Remember that an image might be worth a thousand words, but only the right image will convey the right words!

To create basic content, ask yourself:

- What product or service are you offering the public? Why are you in business?
- What makes your business different from your competitors? Why should customers do business with you?
- Where are you located and how do customers contact you or place an order? Make this information easy to find, but do not let it crowd out information that promotes your product line or business philosophy to your customers.

Are there any additional pieces of important or interesting information that add to the website design, such as hyperlinks to other



related websites or resources, such as North Carolina Sea Grant (*www.ncseagrant.org*) and its "North Carolina Seafood Availability Chart" (*http://www.ncseagrant.org/s/availability*) or the North Carolina Sea Grant seafood "Quality Counts" poster *(http://www.ncseagrant.org/s/quality)*?

With your designer, organize your ideas and webpage content into a simple layout. As shown above, you can diagram the structure to convey the kind of information you feel needs to be on your website. Then allow your designer to organize your web files to fit the design structure you want.

For example, go to *www.carteretcatch.org*. The first page that appears is the **home page** (index page). At the bottom of the home page are four topics: *wild shrimp*, *recipes*, *fishermen* and *join*. When you click on *fishermen*, you are taken to a **main section** (site index) that contains interviews with five different Carteret Catch fishermen. By clicking on the name of any one of the five fishermen, you are taken to a **subsection** containing the actual interviews (content) on the website.

Once a website structure has been decided according to the information you want to share with your customers, the appearance of the website can evolve using different colors, typefaces, illustrations, photographs, videos, and even sound. The list of details and possibilities are endless, but to be effective, keep your website structure simple so it is easy for your customers to navigate, read and understand. This will make your website informative as well as interesting.

GETTING THE BEST SERVICE FOR YOUR WEBSITE

Ultimately, your budget will determine how much you can spend on the development of your website. The website design process can be this easy:

1. Establish an Internet connection (if you don't have one) through an Internet service provider (ISP).

2. Acquire a domain name for your website. This can usually be done through your ISP or web host.

3. Acquire server space from a web host for your website.

4. Design a website for your domain name and place it on the web host's server.

The design can be as simple as customizing a basic format provided by your web host; however, the design may not appear unique and your web host may require that other businesses' advertisements be featured on your website.

To be truly effective, your website should be designed and activated by a professional who offers personalized services to meet your business needs. With a monthly contract, your webmaster might provide:

- Search-engine optimization so Internet search software like Google and Yahoo can easily find your website on the World Wide Web;
- Measurements, such as "hits," that record the number of people who visit your website; and
- Regular monitoring of your website to make sure all of your information remains up to date and the site continues to work properly.

Do you need the very basics? Do you need the best? Do you need something in between? A professional web designer can help you answer these questions.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- FindMyHosting.com
  http://www.findmyhosting.com/webhosting-guide.htm
  This reference will help you find a service to host your website. The Basic Guide to Web Hosting hyperlink in the left column of the webpage takes you to a tutorial on all that is required. If your ISP offers free web hosting space, you may not need to rent space or pay for a domain name.

- Be Succinct! (Writing for the Web)
  http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9703b.html
  Three main guidelines for writing for the Web.

- How to Make a Website
  http://www.allaboutyourownwebsite.com/
  This reference profiles seven steps in building a useful website.

- The Principles of Beautiful Web Design
  http://www.sitepoint.com/article/principles-beautiful-web-design
  Article by Jason Baird.

- Good Web Design
  http://www.thebestdesigns.com/
  A site devoted entirely to the subject of good Web design.

- AIGA Raleigh/web designer portfolios
  http://raleigh.aiga.org/content.cfm?Page=member-portfolios&1=1

- Simple Steps to Finding a Web Designer
  http://www.allbusiness.com/technology/internet-web-design/4040-1.html

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