What Kind of Website is Right for You?

You need a website, you have worked that out. But what do you need it to do? And how?

It can seem like there is so much choice out there as to how to design and manage your website - from free* template-based tools to huge, dynamic sites that'll make the tea and put your shoes on for you too.

And for many small businesses, having a well-meaning web developer asking you what kind of website do you want, before they can even start, can be quite scary - perhaps you just don't know!

Ideally you find a designer that can help you decide, even experiment. But you will find it helpful if you can have a think about the basic things: What do you need a website to do? What kind of person/organisation are you? How much time, money and effort can you invest?

This briefing is intended to give you some information about the options and ask the questions you need, in order to help get the website you need.

* Loose term with multiple meanings!

1. What are the Main Types of Website?

Static / Brochure / Information Website

- A brochure or 'static' website is the main type of website used by small and medium-sized businesses across the world. Made up of up to a dozen or so pages, its main purpose is to provide information - about who you are, what you do, how to find you etc.

- These types of website are typically designed and built on a PC and the files are uploaded to a web server, linked together to form a website. Changes are made by the person who built the website.

- The term 'static' refers to the fact that the content does not change frequently, but a static website now can include all sorts of elements, eg video, audio, Facebook/Twitter feeds, that make it appear 'dynamic'.

Content Managed Website (CMS)

- A Content Management System (CMS) is a web-based program or application that allows you to create, edit and manage your own website content. Typically, a web designer creates a design for you based on a "theme" or "template" for the CMS being used, eg WordPress, Joomla etc. Most of the data or content for your website is stored in a database on a web server, which you are given access to via a user interface.

- The main advantage of a CMS is that you as a client can make updates to your own website. If you need to make regular updates, this can be more cost effective as the initial increased outlay is balanced by not having to pay an hourly rate to your web designer.

E-commerce Website

- These allow business to sell products online. The term 'e-commerce' covers a wide range of websites, from sites with one or two fixed payment buttons (eg linked to a Paypal account) to multiple tiered shops with hundreds of categories and thousands of products. There are many options available and the solution for you depends entirely on your selling needs. If you have a large number of products, a CMS solution where you can manage changes to your stock directly yourself is likely to be better.

2.   The Big Question : Do You Want to Manage Your Own Website?

The Issues to Consider are :

- **Cost:** CMS websites can be costlier - either up front for a bespoke design, or a flat monthly rate for a standard template website, or both. But if you need to make frequent and/or significant changes, this is balanced by ongoing savings of not paying someone else to do it.

- **Design:** You may have less flexibility with the design of a CMS website as it will be constrained by template. The 'free' ones may not achieve the quality impression you wish to give.

- **Learning Requirements:** Obviously you will need to learn how to do it in the first place, and factor in the ongoing time needed to add and change your website content. If you have a CMS site, you must be prepared to take responsibility for it once it is uploaded and operational. You will inevitably need support from your web designer - make sure that it is available and you know whether there are added costs.

- **Reliability:** Even with a good CMS, creating content yourself poses problems and the more you edit over time, the more problems can creep in. People inevitably make mistakes, can't fit what they want into the template limits, choose odd colour combinations, misplace their text etc etc - all of this can compromise the design of your website, as well as requiring a reliable helpdesk facility when you need it!

- **Maintenance and Security:** Content Management Systems, whilst aiming to offer a simple interface for you as the user, are complex "behind the scenes". As such they often have bugs and security weaknesses which are usually discovered and fixed over time. For this reason you need to stay on top of updates and patches for your chosen system in order to keep it as secure as possible. The time and effort of doing this on a regular basis should be factored into your project. Or ensure it is covered in your provider's support package.

- **Hosting Requirements:** Your hosting requirements will increase – you'll need a database connected to the website, as well as a few other things. Whilst this isn't likely to be a major challenge or expense, it's worth asking your web designer about.

3.   Conclusion : CMS v Static

A CMS Website might be best for you if you :

- Are planning on making frequent updates (eg more than once a month).
- Have time-sensitive updates that frequently require immediate publishing and tweaking.
- Enjoy technology and/or can invest time and effort in learning the system and managing it.
- Can get the support when you need it.
- Are comfortable paying more up front but potentially saving money on hourly updates over time.

A Static Website might be best for you if :

- You have a small site.
- Your content doesn't change very often.
- You want an individual design that is unconstrained by templates.
- You're not very technically confident.
- You're short of time, or feel your time is better spent working on something else and you'd prefer to instruct your web designer to do it.

4.   Compromise?

If you can't say yes to the questions about CMS above, but still feel you want to personally communicate more regularly through your website, we can suggest two compromises :

- **Facebook :** Set yourself up a Facebook business page (we can help you if you need it) and use that to post your news and comments. This can help engage 'your public' directly as well as potentially increasing traffic to your website. We can make sure the two are linked. (The same applies to Twitter or any other social media network).

- **Blog :** What about using a blog to post your news, thoughts and articles of interest? You could set up an independent WordPress (or other) free source CMS blog; you use and manage it independently of your website and your website is designed with a link to it. This requires a little effort, but a basic WordPress blog is quite easy to do if you have the commitment. In this way, you don't risk compromising the design of your website, but can still add comments, news, updates, photos etc without having to involve the designer every time. And if you find you don't get on with it, the blog can be abandoned with no loss of function of your website.

Finally, try not to feel overwhelmed by the perceived choice available. The important thing is that you get the website design that is appropriate for you as an individual or small business. If you need any further help or advice, please do not hesitate to get in touch.