Doing Business Online

Rise to the website challenge

Covid–19 means the online space just got a whole lot more competitive, so now is the time to ensure that your website is high–visibility, writes **Fiona Alston**

There is no point in having a beautifully crafted website if no one can find it. This might sound harsh, but it is true, and we may all need to learn this harsh lesson when we are competing for sales in the current climate and finding out that maybe 'free' isn't always the best option.

That climate, of course, being the crisis which the outbreak of Covid-19 has impacted upon businesses. If you are not listed as one of the 'essential' businesses who are still trading from their premises and you don't have an already thriving online sales record, then these lessons are for you. But you are far from alone, we are all on the same boat, so let's flatten the rough seas.

Loughnan Hooper, founder of Dotser, is advising companies to begin thinking about developing their presence online. Whether it's to sell product or just to drive customers to your site, this is the time to be doing it.

"The website can look beautiful, and I've seen people come to us and their site looks fantastic but in six months has had no inquiries. The key thing is being found,

Loughnan Hooper, founder of Dotser

because – no matter whether it's your own time or the money you've put into it – if you're not being found, it's of absolutely no consequence."

The cloud-based business solutions company's e-Pro eCommerce platform combines products, orders, web content management, search engine optimisation and social media integration. The payments system also supports Stripe, Global Payments, Elavon, SagePay and PayPal.

"When I was building the platform initially, we had three points. Obviously, the website can look beautiful, and I've seen people come to us and their site looks fantastic but in six months has had no inquiries. The key thing is being found,

Google natural rankings for our clients. We structured our whole platform around achieving those and we've achieved them – particularly on the ease of use because we've had people with basic PC skills that are able to use our system."

Hooper believes that it is entirely possible to keep your business seen and relevant without paying the extra costs. "That's the key, I believe, to the business being self-sufficient over a long period of time. We're not saying to you to use AdWords, paying a fortune to Google for what I'm going to say is, less effective than natural clicks.

"It's how you create the site behind the scenes, how you make sure you're using search engine-friendly page names, where you're making sure that your image names can also be edited very easily. You can also put in your tags on images that all reflect back to an individual page – we've done everything we can to try to influence the Google algorithm to make sure your page is ranked high."

The company of 11 employees, who are all currently working from home, have had to do a little restructuring of their own offerings since the

beginning of the Covid-19 crisis. Alongside the eCommerce platform, Hooper has been successfully building a platform to support agricultural and equestrian events such as the Tullamore Show. SuperShow is an online competition, trade stand and results management cloud-based software system. Dotser also supplies software to the waste recycling sector with WeRP, its resource management software offering cloud-based

materials, logistics, contract, process management and production.

With the majority of the large outdoor events being cancelled, Hooper focused on increasing opportunities within the e-commerce space – advising that all businesses should be able to take online payments, irrelevant of the sector they are in. Given that the Local Enterprise Offices are offering Trading Online Vouchers to the value of

€2,500 (if you spend €5,000 getting yourself up and running) to upgrade your website to accept online payments, the costs don't seem as daunting.

"Start taking an online payment," advises Hooper. "It doesn't have to be a shop, doesn't have to be an amazing full product listing, it can just be the fact that you have somewhere for your client to go with your invoice to pay online – go into your page

and process the invoice and it's paid. That's surely even reducing your accounts – it's an absolute no brainer – every business should be doing it."

As more and more companies look at how they can restructure to ride out the challenges the Covid-19 crisis brings, it means that, no matter what market you are in or what product you want to sell, it is going to become highly competitive in the online space.

"You're first or nowhere – that's the fact. I see it with our clients. You're on page two [in a Google search], even number 11 – the first on the second page – it's so different to being on that first page. I think people are getting less patient: if they don't find you on the first page, they don't click 'next'.

"We've put a lot of thought into this when designing the back end of the system – URL, page-friendly names, the ability to give effective page titles to your web pages, naming your images, putting in decent enough content that you're mentioning your keyword for that specific page two or three times, editing your meta tags from your title, your description, your keywords to a point. Some people will say they're totally ineffective nowadays, but the process that I've built over the last 12-15 years works across all those things I've mentioned – it works, and it works repeatedly.

"I say to people that they need to be spending €5,000 to set up their site and be thinking of spending €5,000 a year to get into the game that I'm talking about. Some people won't be able to get there, but I think it's a fair budget to expect for any business to have a good platform that they're able to develop themselves and they are trained up on with our support. It's simple to use, but we're also at the end of the phone.

"It takes three to six months to get you up to that top page. I want you to be self-sufficient, in as much as you can be."

Dotser: it's how you create the site behind the scenes, how you make sure you're using search engine-friendly page names