

Why most accountants' websites don't work - and what to do about it

A guide to creating better accountancy firm websites

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BIZiNK

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Why most accountants' sites fail	4
Site does not rank well in search engines	4
The website content is poor and rarely updated	4
Site looks bad and doesn't work well.....	4
The three goals of a firm website	5
Attract New Clients	5
"Websites will be never an important part of my business"	5
Search Engine Optimisation	7
1. Site Structure	8
2. Good content.....	13
3. Inward links	16
Converting traffic	19
Good websites help referrals	20
Build a Contact Database.....	21
Measuring Success.....	21
Hub of your online activity.....	22
Retain and better service existing clients	22
Why content?	23
What content works?.....	24
How to present the content.....	25
Reuse content	26
Adding the personal touch.....	26
Efficiencies and cost savings for the firm	27
Takes the place of other marketing	27
Use online forms	27
Deal with some problems online	27
Client area	27
Online payments.....	28
Attract staff	28
Summary	29
About Matthew	30
About BizInk.....	30
Contact BizInk	30

Introduction

Most accountants' websites don't work. Well, perhaps don't work is too strong. In 2013, most accountants at least have a website, which would not have been true in 2005. But what do these websites do? Apart from featuring contact details, the majority give little benefit to the firm or its clients.

You know the type of site I mean - perhaps your firm has one. A drab and outdated design that does nothing for the firm's image. Limited content, written in a hurry and not changed since the site was launched. Perhaps some badly taken photographs of the staff. Maybe a blog but the last post was two years ago.

Someone said social media was the next big thing so there are links to Twitter and Facebook but only a handful of friends and family are following and the last update was months ago.

What's more, the software that powers the site is hard to use or the web designers are needed every time a change is required. So the website stays as it is, gathering dust and becoming less effective by the day.

I've worked with hundreds of accountants on website projects and I've seen this story repeated over and over again.

It doesn't have to be like this. In fact, your website can play a key role in your firm's success and for a lot less time, cost and effort than you might think.

In this guide I'll show you the common problems with most accountants' websites and demonstrate what can be achieved with a good website. Most importantly, I'll give you lots of practical tips on how to create a great website for your firm that you can start using right away.

Why most accountants' sites fail

Before we look at fixing them, what are the common problems with firms' websites? From a client's perspective there are three main failings:

Site does not rank well in search engines

Clients want great service and will seek it out. But it doesn't matter how good your service is - if people can't find you then you can't help them.

Many firms' websites rank poorly in search engines like Google so they miss out on an important source of new business.

The website content is poor and rarely updated

Even if your site gets plenty of clicks from Google, what happens when users get there? If the site does not have fresh, engaging content, it's likely they will leave pretty fast.

And remember that even clients who are referred to you will invariably check out your website. What impression are you giving them?

For existing clients, if the site has no new and interesting content, what reason is there to visit it?

Site looks bad and doesn't work well

Following on from the last point, a site with poor design that is hard to use will deter new users *and* existing clients.

And in 2013, it's important your site works as well on mobile phones and small devices as it does on desktop monitors.

Internally, your website is a failure if it doesn't deliver efficiencies or cost savings. This can either be due to poor software features or a lack of training and support or lack of commitment from your website provider. The net result is that the website seems more like a burden than an asset.

The three goals of a firm website

So far I've talked about firm websites that don't work. But if we're going to look at how a site should work, we first need to look at what its aims should be. The three goals of an accounting firm website are:

- 1 To attract new clients
- 2 To retain existing clients
- 3 To create efficiencies for the firm

If your website does all of these, consider it a success, stop reading and pat yourself on the back!

If not, then let's look at these points in more detail and what you can do to start achieving them.

Attract new clients

New business is essential to any firm and your website can play a key role in delivering it. But first you need to recognise what a powerful source of new leads it can be.

'Websites will never be an important part of my business'

When I'm talking to accountants, they often say, 'most of our business comes from referrals so a website isn't important,' and so justify not putting any effort into their site.

I'll never deny that referrals are the mainstay of new business, but there is some faulty logic at play here. Let me explain:

If your website is poor, it will never generate new business for you. And if you don't do any other marketing, then obviously referrals will always be your main source of new clients. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy.

So what are you missing out on? Potential clients are searching for accountants in your area as you read this. Just look at the searches for accountants in Sydney in March 2013:

Keyword	Competition	Global Monthly Searches	Local Monthly Searches
accountants sydney	High	1,000	1,000
tax accountants sydney	High	1,300	1,300
tax accountant sydney	High	880	880
chartered accountants sydney	High	8,100	6,600
accountants in sydney	High	12,100	12,100
accounting sydney	High	1,300	1,300
accounting firms sydney	High	1,300	2
accounting firms in sydney	High	260	91
accountants sydney cbd	High	12,100	
accountant sydney	High	880	
chartered accountant sydney	High	12,100	
		140	
		320	
		91	

Search data from Google's Keyword tool

There were over 30,000 unique searches for 'sydney accountants' or related terms. When you consider there are somewhere in the region of 7,000 accountancy firms in the whole of Australia, that's a big number. And a lot of potential business.

Even if you could convert just 0.1% of the searches into new business, that would be 30 new clients per month. I'm sure most firms would be more than happy with this.

If a potential client was searching for an accountancy firm in your area, would your firm be found in the first listing page on Google? And if it was, and they clicked, what impression would they get from your site?

Remember that anyone searching for accountants is effectively comparison shopping. They will also have several other tabs open with your competitors' websites in them. If your website is not better than your rivals, you can say goodbye to that lead.

Search engine optimisation

To start getting leads from search engines, some search engine optimisation (SEO) of your site is needed. SEO covers a multitude of online marketing techniques. It's something that has been made needlessly complicated by SEO 'experts'. They blind you with science in order to convince you of their special knowledge and that you should hire them. I've lost count of the number of conversations I've had with accountants, worrying that they need to do 'more SEO'.

The reality of SEO, especially for accountants, is that it's not that complicated. If you follow some basic rules and put in a small amount of effort each month you can soon be ranking highly in search engines.

Before we look at what you should do, it's important to keep in mind what search engines aim to do: to provide an ordered list of websites, relevant to what a user has searched for.

The focus here is the user. Search engines are there to help users, not your firm. So if you want to rank well, you need to make a site that is good for users:

As Google states:

'... we'd like to say that you should base your optimization decisions first and foremost on what's best for the visitors of your site. They're the main consumers of your content and are using search engines to find your work. Focusing too hard on specific tweaks to gain ranking in the organic results of search engines may not deliver the desired results. Search engine optimization is about putting your site's best foot forward when it comes to visibility in search engines, but your ultimate consumers are your users, not search engines.'¹

This is actually great news. You don't need to worry about all the devious tricks that the SEO 'experts' recommend. You should focus on creating a website that users love and let Google do the rest.

¹ Google Search Engine Optimisation Starter Guide

Although there are several search engines, Google is the world leader. For the sake of ease, I'll use them in the examples below but the techniques are valid for other major search engines like Bing from Microsoft².

To rank well in Google, you need to meet their guidelines. Again, no secrets here, they publish them in a downloadable guide.³

I'd recommend you read this guide but don't feel you have to implement everything straight away. As Google states:

'Creating compelling and useful content will likely influence your website more than any of the other factors discussed here'⁴

I'll later expand on this to show you how 'compelling and useful content' should be the centre of all your online activities. But for now lets look at some practical SEO tips you can implement on your website today.

I would suggest you can get most of the benefits by sticking to some simple guidelines. You need to focus on three things:

- 1 Site structure
- 2 Good content
- 3 Inward links

1 Site structure

By site structure I mean both how your website content is organised and the technical aspects of how your site was built. In broad terms, what matters is the quality of the code used to build the site and how your content is organised and formatted.

Get the basics right and Google will have no problems with your site. With a little effort, you could see some gains but these tend to be marginal compared with writing good content and getting inward links – more on these points later.

² <http://www.bing.com>

³ www.google.com/webmasters/docs/search-engine-optimization-starter-guide.pdf

⁴ Google Search Engine Optimisation Starter Guide

Organise your content

Let's start with organising the content. This is as simple as creating a logical structure so your site is easy to use.

The most common way to do this is by using a 'site tree' – a hierarchical list of the pages of your site. For complex sites, a site tree can be too simplistic, but for most firms, who don't have huge websites, it's perfect.

Here's an example of a site tree from a typical firm's website:

- Home
- About
 - The Team
 - Job Opportunities
- Services
 - Audit & Assurance
 - Business Advisory
 - Business Services
 - Specialist Services
 - Taxation
 - Wealth Management
- Blog
- Client Login
- Contact
 - Directions

A structure like this is simple and logical with all the pages where a user would expect to find them. Don't try and be creative here in order to stand out from other firms. Stick to a simple structure and organise your site around it.

There is a dual purpose here: firstly, and most importantly, your site will be easy to use, so visitors will enjoy using it and be more likely to take the actions you want.

Secondly, it makes your site easy for search engines to 'crawl'. Search engines gather information about websites by sending out tiny programmes called

'Robots' or just 'Bots' which look at website content, and can then be displayed in the results.

If your site has a good structure, that is easy to navigate, the Bots are more likely to find out about all the pages on your site, giving you a better chance of a good search engine ranking.

Technical Aspects

The good news is, if you've got a decent website supplier, they have probably taken care of the technical side of your site for you. But it's good to be aware of this part of SEO, so here's an overview:

Quality code

The computer code the site is written in (usually HTML and CSS with some Javascript) should comply with the latest web standards. These are created by the World Wide Web Consortium⁵. You can check your website's code using a tool provided by the W3C⁶.

If there are a lot of errors, you should contact your website supplier. However, there are many reasons a few errors or warnings can occur on otherwise well-coded sites. Fix them if you can, but don't lose sleep over them as they are unlikely to affect your search engine ranking.

Page structure

When we write a text document like a report there is an accepted structure of headings, paragraphs, notes and the like. So it is with web pages and it's important to get it right.

The most important part is the correct use of headings, which are like flags, highlighting important content for search engines.

Make sure you have a main heading (<h1> in HTML) on every page which describes what the page is about. Also try and break up the text with secondary

⁵ World Wide Web Consortium (<http://www.w3.org/>)

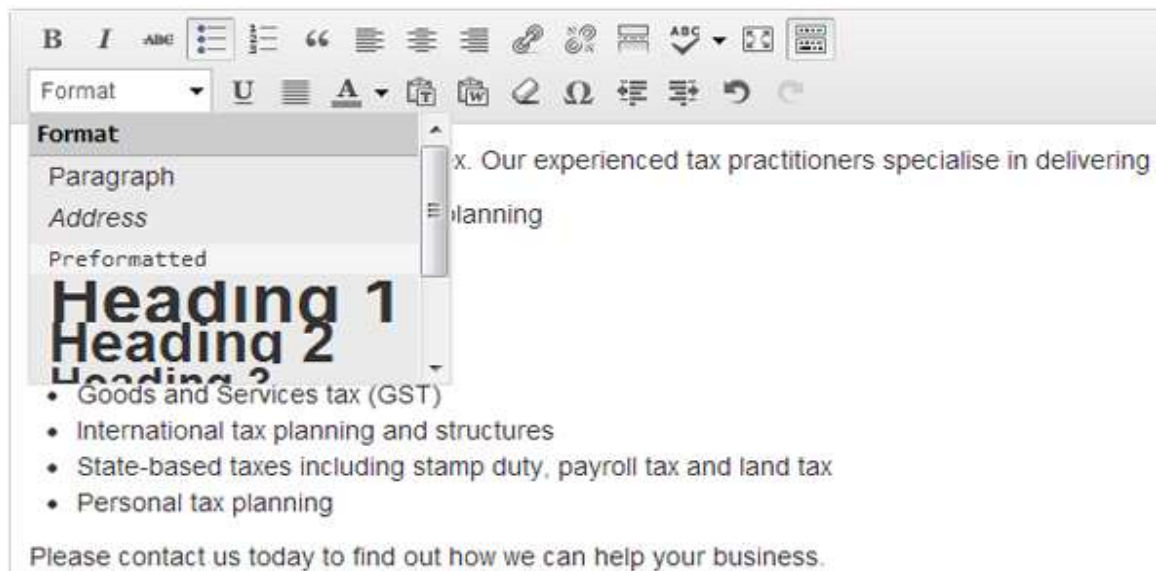
⁶ <http://validator.w3.org/>

headings (<h2> in HTML) which contain important words or phrases about the page.

For those who want to learn more about the correct structure of web pages, here's the official page from the W3C.⁷

This may seem quite technical but for most modern websites, understanding the underlying code is not necessary. If your website is powered by a content management system (CMS) you will probably be able to edit your content using a text editor that looks a lot like a word processor.

For example, the editor in my company BizInk's CMS looks like this:



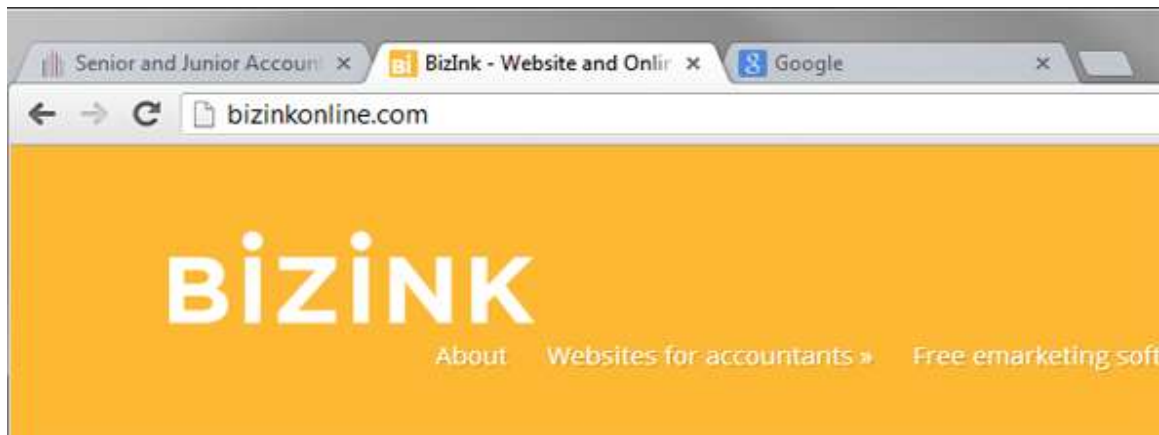
Text formatting options in the BizInk website editor

You can see the heading dropdown as well as buttons for making the text bold, italic or underlined. No technical skill is needed.

Titles

The titles of web pages are important. This is the text you see on the tab of your web browser, not on the page itself.

⁷ <http://www.w3.org/TR/html401/struct/global.html> (Requires an understanding of HTML)



Tabs in Google's Chrome Browser showing website titles

Search engines regard the title as important so you should make sure it is descriptive and contains key words relating to your firm.

Titles are created behind the scenes using the HTML <title> tag, but some websites' content management systems allow you to create them through a simple interface.

Meta data

Meta data is information contained in a web page that is not displayed to the end user when they look at the site. Contrary to what many people think, it has no bearing on your search engine ranking.

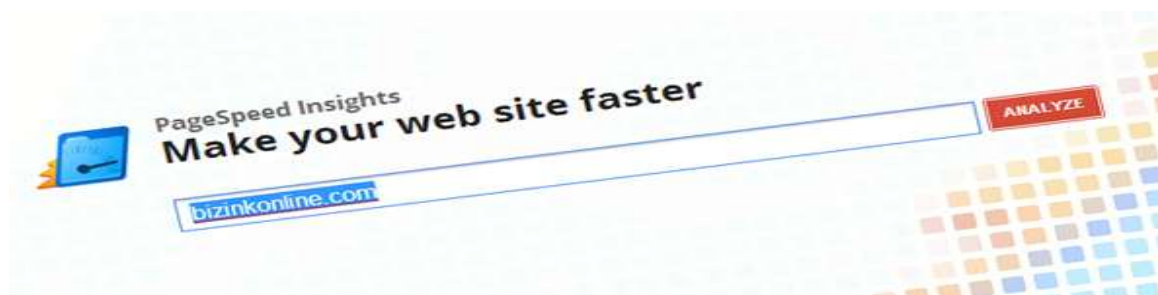
However, adding descriptive content can help Google get a better understanding of your site. Fiddling with meta data would be way down my list of jobs to do on your website, so let's not dwell on it but for further reading, read what Google have to say.⁸

Performance

It's easy to assume that all your users have blazing fast broadband connections but in reality, many will have slow connections, especially in rural areas. And with mobile internet increasing rapidly, there is a clear need to have a website that downloads quickly.

⁸ <http://support.google.com/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=79812>

Search engines have recognised this and will look favourably on sites with good performance. To see how your site is performing, use Google Page Speed Tool.⁹



Google's Page Speed Tool

A score over 70 should be fine but take a note of their recommendations and see if you can work with your website supplier to improve your site. Below 70 and you should be asking some questions, as a slow site will be frustrating to use and could see your search engine ranking drop.

It's important to reiterate here that while all of the above is important, none of it in isolation will make a big difference. In fact, there are several sites (mainly old ones) which break all of the guidelines above, yet still do very well in Google – because they have great content.

2. Good content

You've probably heard the phrase 'content is king' when it comes to the internet. You might think that people are interested in your website design and special features but they can find similar on 1000s of sites on the web with the same or better. It's good content they are really after.

A professionally designed website with lots of features is now standard. To set yourself apart you need really good content. It's what will attract business users and help your search engine ranking. I'll delve deeper into content in the next section about client retention. But for the purpose of search engines, let's look at keywords and how to use them to create good content for users.

⁹ <https://developers.google.com/speed/pagespeed/insights>

Keywords

Keywords should really be called key phrases as almost nobody types a single word into search engines. A typical key phrase for an accountant would be:

'Accountants in melbourne cbd'

To find out what potential clients in your area are searching for, you can use the Google Keyword Tool.¹⁰



Google's Keyword Tool

Google provide this tool to help customers of their AdWords service create effective advertising – which in turn makes Google one of the biggest companies in the world! But we are free to use it to find exactly which words and phrases people are using to look for accountants online.

Once you have a list of keywords, you can start working them into our website content and so boost your search engine ranking.

Fire up the tool and type something into the box marked 'Word or Phrase'. Start with something fairly generic like 'Accountants Melbourne (insert your town or city here)' and hit search.

The tool will show you how many people searched for that phrase in the last month. For a generic phrase like 'Accountants Melbourne' a high number of searches is good.

¹⁰ <https://adwords.google.com/o/KeywordTool>

The tool will also list related search phrases used by people that month. For example, 'small business accounting melbourne' and 'melbourne tax accountants'. There will be less searches for these terms but that's good as they are more targeted – more on that later.

Make a note of any keywords and phrases that fit your firm well, especially related to services you specialise in. You should make a list of about 20 phrases. The tool even has a handy export to Excel function to make your life easier. You've now got a keyword list but what to do with it?

Clearly our aim is to capture the people searching for those terms, get them to the website and hopefully convert them into clients. To do that, we need to get the phrases into our website content but this is the part where many people go wrong and end up cluttering their website with meaningless rubbish that will deter users. Let me explain:

Write for users, not search engines

Google is the best search engine because it understands the difference between good and bad content. That's the simple reason why people choose it over other search engines – it gives better results.

In the past, website owners crammed their sites full of keywords in an attempt to get ranked highly. But Google's job is to create relevant results for its users, not help you get more clients! And it employs some of the smartest brains on the planet to devise ways of detecting bad content. In fact, if you were to simply paste all the keywords on your list into your website pages, Google might penalise your site and push you down the rankings.

Fortunately, adding keywords to your site the right way is not complicated and will result in more conversions. The trick is to write for users, not for search engines.

Start by taking a key phrase – let's take, for example 'tax accountants Melbourne'. If you offer tax services in Melbourne, then you should create a page dedicated to it, covering all the tax services you offer.

You'll be able to add plenty of keywords to this pages without it feeling forced:

- tax accountants
- tax accountants melbourne
- gst accountants melbourne
- Combinations of keywords like 'Melbourne CBD' and 'income tax'

Very quickly you've created some content that features lots of keywords. What's more, it is informative and targeted so when a user clicks through from Google, there's a good chance they will give you a call. A win for you and the user!

Break up the text with headings and be sure to have keywords and phrases in them. It's also good to repeat keywords, but not too often. There are no hard and fast rules as to what is 'too often'. But if you feel you are forcing keywords into the text, then it's likely you've overdone it.

Repeat the process for key pages on your website. The most obvious ones will be pages about the services you offer but also review the 'about us' and the homepage. The importance of the homepage (roughly only 40% of users will enter your site that way) is overrated and don't try and overload it with too much content. It will dilute your message when users land on the site.

Finally, writing a blog can really help. Google likes sites with plenty of content, especially if they're updated on a regular basis. And if you're blogging, it's likely you will be using the keywords related to your business so that will give your search engine ranking a boost too.

3. Inward links

Inward links are links from other websites. In simple terms, search engines will rank your site higher if it contains lots of links.

When Google first launched, the number of links a site had was an important factor in how they decided on search ranking. It was a key differentiator for Google and saw them become the biggest search engine in the world, and it still plays an important role in how they rank sites today.

When people learnt this, they started trying to Spam (rank highly using underhand techniques) by using 'Link Farms'. These were collections of junk websites that were merely a collection of links. Site owners could pay to have the sites link to their website in the hope it would improve their ranking.

This practice worked for a short period before Google's engineers got wise to it. They now combat Link Farms with sophisticated detection methods and joining one could see your site dropped from Google. So steer well clear of Link Farms or anything else that sounds too good to be true or a bit dodgy.

So then how do you get legitimate inward links? Unfortunately there is no short-cut – it takes time and a fair bit of effort but is worth it in the end. Many firms ignore inward links and their ranking suffers as a result.

Start your 'link building' with some easy wins. An essential is Google Places¹¹. This gives you a free business listing and will show your business on Google Maps. Firms who incorporate this will usually see their results climb above those that don't.

¹¹ www.google.com.au/local/add

Ads related to tax accountants in victoria australia ©

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www.linkacct.com.au/
 Business Tax Returns. Minimum Tax. Maximum Profit. Call Today. Perth.

CPA Accounting Services - KeramitsisCo.com.au
www.keramitsisco.com.au/Accountants
 Professional Accounting Solutions. Range Of Services. Call Us Today!

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www.truelocal.com.au > Accountants
 Find quality accountants in VIC. Locate chartered accountants, bookkeepers, financial accountants and tax agents in VIC with TrueLocal Australia.

Australia - VIC - Saasu Online Accounting - Partners
partners.saasu.com/partners?category=accounting Australia, VIC
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Accounting Career Information for Skilled Migrants ... - Live in Victoria
www.livein victoria.vic.gov.au > ... > Occupations
 Accounting career information for skilled migrants to Australia, including industry ... to help you find a job and meet other professionals in Victoria, Australia ... Banking, Tax & Legal Requirements Information about banking and taxes for ...

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Toppoint Accounting www.toppointaccounting.com.au/ Score: 30 / 30 - 11 Google reviews	8 Edmonds Ave Ashwood VIC (03) 9005 6060
H&R Block www.hrblock.com.au/ Google+ page	2nd/175 Collins St Melbourne VIC (03) 9654 5056
MP Tax & Business Solutions mptax.com.au/ Google+ page	205 Heaths Rd Wendee VIC (03) 9740 0235
Maddern Private Wealth Pty Ltd maddernfinancial.com.au/private_wealth Google+ page	238/20 Milton Parade Malvern VIC (03) 9999 7200



Google search results page showing firms with a Google Places listing highlighted in yellow, and as pins on the map

Next, get listed in all the local and national business directories. It's usually free and you can add a link back to your site.

You might also look at some industry specific websites such as that of your industry body or an accountant directory like Accountant List¹².

Naturally, if you have social media profiles on sites like LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook, you should include a link back to your site.

Next you might ask some clients to link back to your site. You could return the favour with a link to their site.

¹² <http://accountantlist.com.au/>

Content again plays an important role here. If you are regularly creating interesting content, especially blog posts, you will find that people start to link to you.

After that, you need to be a bit more creative. If you decide to actively try and get PR, then links from a local newspaper can really help. Perhaps you are a blogger – why not do a guest post on another site, making sure to include a link back to your firm? There are endless ways, so always be on the look-out.

A final point on links – they are not just for search engines. If there are tens, hundreds and eventually thousands of sites linking to you, it creates more ways for you to be found.

Converting traffic

Of course, getting lots of visitors from Google is useless unless they're 'converted', to use a term from online retail. For an online shop a conversion simply means turning a visitor into a buyer.

For firm's websites, there is not usually a tangible product to sell (some firms sell software or fixed price services) but you still want new visitors to do something and not leave empty-handed. Examples would be:

- Call and make an appointment
- Download a brochure
- Fill in an enquiry form

The marketing name for them is Calls to Action (CTAs) and you should aim to have one on every important page on your site. Make sure the CTA is simple and stands out on the page. Avoid having too many on the page or you will create indecision and the user will do nothing.

Blog

13 **Cut costs and improve profit**

Mar

Posted by Matt Wilkinson

Many businesses look to make more sales in order to increase profit. While more sales is rarely a bad thing, cutting costs can be the quickest and most efficient way to generate profit.

[Read More »](#)

13

Mar

Posted by Matt Wilkinson

We have added a calendar of key dates from Australian Tax Office (ATO) to our website.

It features all the important deadlines in the financial year so now you have no excuse for getting your tax return information to use late!

Have a look at the [key date calendar](#) here.

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Prominent CTAs on the BizInk Demo website

It's important to define the conversion goals for your website and then measure them. It's the only way you can judge the effectiveness of your website and marketing.

Borrowing from online retailing, you could use the conversion rate metric. This is simply the percentage of visitors who go on to do something on the site. So if your site had 2,600 visitors in one month and 12 called for an appointment, the conversion rate would be 0.46%.

Obviously a higher conversion rate is better. And typically, it costs far less to increase your conversion rate than to get more visitors. So using the numbers above, if you wanted to double the number of calls, it would be cheaper to increase the conversion rate to 0.92%, than to try and attract another 2,600 monthly visitors.

Good websites help referrals

Aside from the missed opportunity with search engine and other web traffic, a poor website can even hurt your referral business. If one of your happy clients recommends you to one of their contacts, the first thing they will do is put your name into Google and check out your site. They are already 'warm' and there is a good chance they will become a client. But a good website can seal the deal. Conversely, they could be turned off if you have a poor website or worse, no website at all.

In most cases, the cost of a good website is the same as a bad one so there is really no excuse!

Build a contact database

Email is the most effective form of online marketing. So every firm should be trying to build a database of quality contacts.

Your website is a great place to do this by using an online subscription form. People won't give away their contact details lightly, so you need to offer something in return. Again this relates to content – if you are creating useful content then you have something to tempt them.

Whether it's a newsletter of useful tips, a whitepaper, or guide you've written, give something away and start building your database.

Measuring success

Like any marketing campaign, it's essential to have a clear target against which to measure success. Well defined numerical goals work best, taking care to make them as specific and detailed as possible.

Any goal should result in a tangible benefit for the firm, so avoid things like 'increase visitors by 20% next month' which is useless if none of them become clients. Here are some goals that you might use:

- Increase enquiries from businesses interested in tax planning services by 10% each month
- Get 100 people to sign up for a networking event the firm is sponsoring through an online form on the website
- 20 downloads of a superannuation guide

To track what's happening on your website, use or sign up for Google Analytics¹³. It's free and gives you detailed statistics on where visitors are coming from and what they are doing on your site.

¹³ <http://www.google.com.au/analytics/>

You do need a bit of technical expertise to get it up and running but any good web supplier should do it for you for nothing.

Hub of your online activity

To wrap up this section on attracting new clients, it's important to realise that a website is no longer a firm's only online presence.

Many firms now have a LinkedIn company profile, Twitter stream or Facebook page. You might even have a YouTube channel, be posting on specialist forums or writing a blog.

With all those extra places people can find you, you might think your website has become less important. Not so – in fact it's the opposite.

Your website is the glue that binds your online identity together. It's 100% yours so you can control every aspect of how it looks and works.

Social media sites are great but they are owned by third parties, over which you have limited control. Use them, but don't rely on them as they might not be around in 12 months' time as history has shown us.

Make your website the hub of your online activity. It's where you will direct your email marketing campaigns; your social media sites should link to it; and it's where you should post all of the content you produce.

Retain and give better service to existing clients

This is the most neglected role of firms' websites. A good website can add value for your clients with little effort, enhancing your reputation and creating a stronger bond with them. So how do you do it?

It's all about content. Business owners are hungry for advice on how to run their companies. And there is no better place for delivering that than through a website. Sure, a face to face meeting is more in-depth but you can't visit clients

every time they have a problem. But a website full of good content means you can help them 24/7 at the exact time they need it. You can be proactive without lifting a finger.

Why content?

Quality content is what drives the web. Internet fads come and go almost every month. But content will always be popular.

To prove my point, here are some of the most popular sites in the world:

Google	Organises content to make it easier to discover
YouTube	Video content sharing
Facebook	Sharing content like pictures, and videos with friends
BBC	News, sport and travel content
Twitter	Sharing content of 140 characters or less

What makes all these sites successful is their content. They could change their design or features and be just as successful.

For an accountancy firm, there are several reasons why you need quality website content:

- It enhances your position as the trusted advisor. Your website is a platform to demonstrate your expertise, which makes your clients respect and trust you more.
- It adds value. By helping your clients through your website, you can offer more than compliance work without a huge amount of effort.
- It starts a conversation. If you have engaged a client with quality website content, they are more likely to contact you regarding other services. You can be quite explicit about this by including contact details at the end of all content.
- It creates a more personal relationship with clients you may rarely. If you've bought a firm perhaps you've never met some clients at all. Through website content like a blog, video or staff profiles, clients can discover what you look and sound like. Otherwise their only interaction with the firm might be the annual bill!

- It creates efficiencies for your firm. By answering the trivial questions online, you don't waste time dealing with them by phone or email.
- It helps your search engine ranking. As we saw in the previous section about attracting clients, Google loves sites with quality content.

What type of content works?

The best content is advice that focuses on the main concerns of business owners. Times change but the problems business people face never do.

Some examples would be:

- How do I write a business plan?
- Tips for better cash flow management
- How to prepare a business for sale

A good way to get ideas is to think about the questions that clients ask time and again. Write them down and then create content that answers them.

As well as the general business questions, there are certain to be some quite specific accountancy related questions too. Make sure to include detailed answers for these – they are often the most useful to clients and mean you don't need to deal with time-consuming calls.

As a bare minimum, you should give specific information on tax and legislative changes. You are the expert in these areas and your clients look to you for advice on them.

Taking things further, you could write opinion pieces about the financial issues affecting businesses. You are an expert in these areas too so clients value your opinion. Don't be afraid to be controversial or at least avoid sitting on the fence.

Also try and be topical. Scan the news for business stories and then give your spin on them.

How to present content

The easiest way to add content is simple articles. These can be static web pages or delivered through your blog or latest news page.

But interactive content has been proven to be the most effective.

Interactive content moves beyond words and pictures to offer the client something. For example, a business plan generator or a downloadable cash flow template. This keeps them engaged as they use the content and gives them something to take away.



A cash flow forecast tool on the BizInk Demo website is an example of interactive content

If you have a blog, turn on the commenting facility. This allows clients and users to start discussions. It gives you more chances to demonstrate your knowledge and shows you are proactive.

Video can work well and some people are very good at talking to the camera. If there is someone like that in your firm, they could deliver financial tips in a regular video. It would be a novel feature of an accountant's site that clients and first-time visitors would enjoy.

As a final point on content, make sure it has been thoroughly proofed before you publish it. While great content will enhance your reputation, sloppy mistakes look bad, especially for an accountant who should have an eye for detail.

Re-use content

Creating content can take time but once you've done it, there are lots of ways to re-use it.

For example, if you wrote a detailed report on cash flow planning, this could be broken down into several blog posts. You could then promote your blog post in your email newsletter, using a snippet of the post.

You could also refer to the blog posts using social media such as your LinkedIn page, Twitter or Facebook.

You might even approach a local newspaper and provide them with content – as long as they agree to credit you and your firm.

So from one piece of content, you can create a marketing campaign for little extra effort.

Adding the personal touch

If you don't get to see clients much, your website can help them get to know you. If you buy a firm, it might be a while before you meet clients, so make a good first impression with your website as they are sure to take a look.

At least have a team profile page with images, profiles and contact details of your staff. Make sure the photos are good quality. Using a professional photographer is best. At least make sure you have a good camera with decent backgrounds and lighting. Images taken using a phone camera will make you and your firm look unprofessional.

You might even make a video introduction to your firm. High definition cameras are now cheap and you can upload it to a site like YouTube and then embed it in your site for free.

Efficiencies and cost savings for the firm

Technology promises time savings but managing your website can seem like a bind. It doesn't have to be and should make your firm more efficient. Here are some ways it can do that:

Takes the place of other marketing

As we've seen above, you can write once and re-use a piece of content with blog posts, newsletter or in social media with some quick copy and pasting.

Some larger firms have created a 'virtual news room', a fancy phrase for a section on the website for press releases and cuttings. It can help you get media coverage.

Use online forms

Online forms can be used for everything from a job application to a client questionnaire. The data is stored centrally rather than in a series of emails and can usually be imported into your practice management or marketing software.

Deal with some problems online

This could be as simple as a FAQs page as most clients have similar problems. How many times do you answer the same questions? Note them down and add them to your site.

A little more advanced would be an online ticketing system or even live chat as methods of dealing with clients. These could be operated by junior staff members, freeing up partners to work on more profitable jobs.

The main thing is to avoid interruptions through trivial calls from clients.

Client area

Receiving numerous files by email from clients is inefficient and insecure. A secure client area or drop box is safer and more efficient.

There are various providers out there from consumer solutions like DropBox¹⁴ or Google Drive¹⁵ to business focused products like ShareFile¹⁶ or Box¹⁷. All have their pros and cons but the main problem is training your clients. If they don't like the software, they won't use it so make sure you choose something that works for them.

Online payments

It's now easy to create a payment form on your website so clients can pay bills online. Imagine the time and cost savings if you could convert all your clients to pay this way.

Some accountants even become retailers and sell products like accounting software or business books.

You can get started immediately with PayPal¹⁸ but it doesn't look very professional and it takes days to extract your money.

If you're serious about taking online payments, choose an online payment gateway. Your bank will probably have a preferred provider but DPS Payment Express¹⁹ and eWAY²⁰ are two reputable providers.

Attract staff

Finding staff through adverts or recruitment agents is costly and time consuming. A well written job advert and online application form can help you attract good staff at a fraction of the price.

And if you become good at search engine optimisation, it should be easy to capture most of the searches for 'accountants jobs' or similar in your area.

¹⁴ <https://www.dropbox.com/>

¹⁵ <https://drive.google.com/>

¹⁶ <http://www.sharefile.com/>

¹⁷ <https://www.box.com/>

¹⁸ <https://www.paypal.com/>

¹⁹ www.paymentexpress.com/

²⁰ <http://www.eway.com.au/>

Summary

I hope you've found this guide useful and you can start applying some of the tips to your website right away. But really I've only scratched the surface when it comes to the benefits your website could bring to your firm.

And although I've touched on online marketing techniques, I deliberately focused on websites. There are many things firms should be doing online like email newsletters, social media and paid search advertising. But the priority has to be getting the firm's website working really well *then* trying to drive more people to it using online marketing.

About the author

Matthew Wilkinson has been involved in online business since the late 1990s. As well as starting and running two ecommerce businesses, he has worked as a consultant to numerous companies, helping them improve their websites and online marketing.

Since 2010 he has been working exclusively with accountancy firms and in 2012 founded BizInk to provide firms with better websites, content and online marketing tools.

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About BizInk

BizInk provides accountants with tools to run their firms more efficiently and provide a better service to their clients.

In their role as trusted advisor, accountants are key to business success. BizInk enhances the accountant's role by providing accessible websites, software and content that clients and accountants love.

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