



websites that work

WRA guide to website savvy

By *Cynthia Whitney-Ward*

In 1964 when PNW Bell Corporation dreamed up the now famous slogan “let your fingers do the walking” for their Yellow Pages campaign, they didn’t have a clue where those fingers would be walking in the year 2010. But, according to a recent Zagat survey, those fingers are making a beeline straight to the Internet. Eighty-three percent of Internet users, it seems, find a restaurant online. And almost half of those surveyed made their reservations online as well. Conclusion? Websites are integral to successfully marketing your restaurant. If you don’t have one, you might need to re-think how you’re reaching your current customers and reaching out to new ones. If you do have a website, but it’s not generating new business, a re-design could give you a stronger presence on the web and give your competitors a run for their money.

To help you work through the process of either creating or re-vamping your website, we’ve talked with restaurateurs who have a bit of website know-how and we’ve chatted with web designers who have shared their expertise and process with us. Their combined sage advice helped us put together the following guide to website savvy.

Immediacy

If you had to boil down the essence of a well-designed and successful website it would come down to how restaurateur Jill Bassett of Plae Bistro describes hers. “Our name is an acronym for a “place to laugh and eat,” says Bassett, who opened her upscale Green Bay bistro three years ago. “So, we filled the website with gorgeous photos of people laughing and eating great food. We wanted to capture the moment, so that you would feel that you were already there.” When

you open Plae’s website you feel that immediacy. There are soft, ambient sounds and music, and people having fun and laughing. And the photographs at the top of the page dissolve and change, giving you a delicious glimpse into what you will experience when you walk through their door.

When you open the Fields at the Wilderness website and see the mouth-watering photo at the top of their home page, you have no doubt what this Wisconsin Dells restaurant is all about—steaks. Gorgeous, thick, perfectly-turned-out steaks. Not only do you feel you’re there, you wish you were there cutting into that inviting hunk of sirloin. You only get one chance to make that first impression. Whoever penned that old adage certainly didn’t have the Internet in mind, but it applies. Re-phrased, it might say: you only get one nanosecond to capture that potential customer.

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The hook

The Republic Chophouse website also sizzles and tells you exactly who they are—a restaurant that combines steak and style beautifully. “That was the website challenge,” says David Richards, Creative Director of Burnham Richards, the Green Bay advertising firm that worked their magic and considerable

expertise on translating that essence onto the Chophouse website. “We do a four-part branding process” says Richards, who designed the site even before the restaurant was up and running. “It helps us know the restaurant’s strengths and weaknesses and internal perceptions. But,” says Richards, “if you don’t look beyond your internal view, you’re only

getting a corner of the picture.” Before touching on the design and content of the site, Richards talked with customers and potential customers to get those external perceptions. Then they looked at the latest trends and what the competition was up to. “Ultimately,” says Richards, “we’re looking for that hook; what people are going to remember you for; what will



Plae Bistro, Green Bay
www.plaebistro.com



Fields at the Wilderness
www.fieldsatthewilderness.com



Republic Chophouse, Green Bay
www.republicchophouse.com



Hillcrest on Lake Wisconsin, Merrimac
www.hillcrestrestaurant.com



Urbane, Sheboygan
http://www.urbanehospitality.com

get them to walk through your door.”

Options

Whether you're creating a website from scratch or overhauling an existing one, there are options available at every price point. The Republic Chophouse and Plae chose to hire an agency. “That’s where I wanted to spend my marketing money,” says Bassett. “We not only got a great website, but because Burnham Richards is local, they’ve brought us a ton of business. They come in with their families and host all of their business meetings here. They’ve ‘paid back’ a good 25% of what we’ve paid them,” laughs Bassett. Thane Newman, owner of Hillcrest on Lake Wisconsin in Merrimac just launched his newly-designed website. He’s a staunch believer in Internet marketing and knew that his old site was static and plain. “I bartered with one of my customers who’s a web designer,” explains Newman. “The new site is friendlier and we can update information ourselves, keeping customers current on specials and events.” Urbane, offering cocktailing and dining in Sheboygan, did a complete re-design of their website as well and “hired” one of their employees to do it. “Ben walked me through the process, showed me his capabilities and what software he’d use and what it could do,” explains co-owner Dennis Radke, who also opted to have the site designed



so it can be maintained in-house. “Ben took many of the photographs,” explains Radke, “and we did a trade with some of our customers who are also photographers. The photos were high quality; it worked out well.” Applied Data Consultants, Inc. of Eau Claire offers several low-end options that would work if a restaurant only needs a presence on the web and the simplicity of 3-4 pages for menus, location and specials. The cost is \$199 and they will host the site for a nominal \$15 a month. And, it can be up and running within a week. For a more comprehensive site, says V.P. Susan Marchott, they offer a \$699 package with local hosting and an

easy content management system that can be updated by the restaurant. Wisconsin-based Wisnet/ Websites 4 Restaurants offers template and custom-designed options, both with capabilities for the restaurant to edit and modify their own sites. “The more information you can post on a regular basis on

your website,” says Wisnet owner Rick Kolstad, “the more likely you’ll get picked up by Google and found by potential customers. This, is key.” Wisnet offers a \$700 template-driven website for WRA members.

Strategizing your content

Even if you’re working with a professional web designer, your input will be integral to the design process. As we said in the beginning of this article, knowing your story, knowing who you’re trying to attract and what potential customers are looking for, will help you develop the perfect hook and go a long way in helping you design a successful site.

There needs to be basic information, of course—location, hours, menus and contact information. But your ultimate goal should be to capture the essence of your restaurant, so when folks walk in, they’re going to experience what they saw on your website.

How do you figure all of that out? “Research,” says Patrick Neph, owner of Republic Chophouse, who looked at scores of websites of the most famous steakhouses in the country. What he found was a big surprise. “Most of them were lacking in a lot of areas,” says Neph, who resolved not to make the same mistakes on his website. “It was important for potential customers to see clearly what our restaurant looked like before they set foot in our door. We included photos of our dining tables draped in white linen so they would know how to dress, and we put prices on our web menus, so there are no surprises.”

And remember, most people aren’t surfing the web looking for the most beautiful restaurant website. They’re looking for a great restaurant experience and if you capture their attention, present all the information quickly and seamlessly and do it in a style that communicates exactly who you are—they will come.



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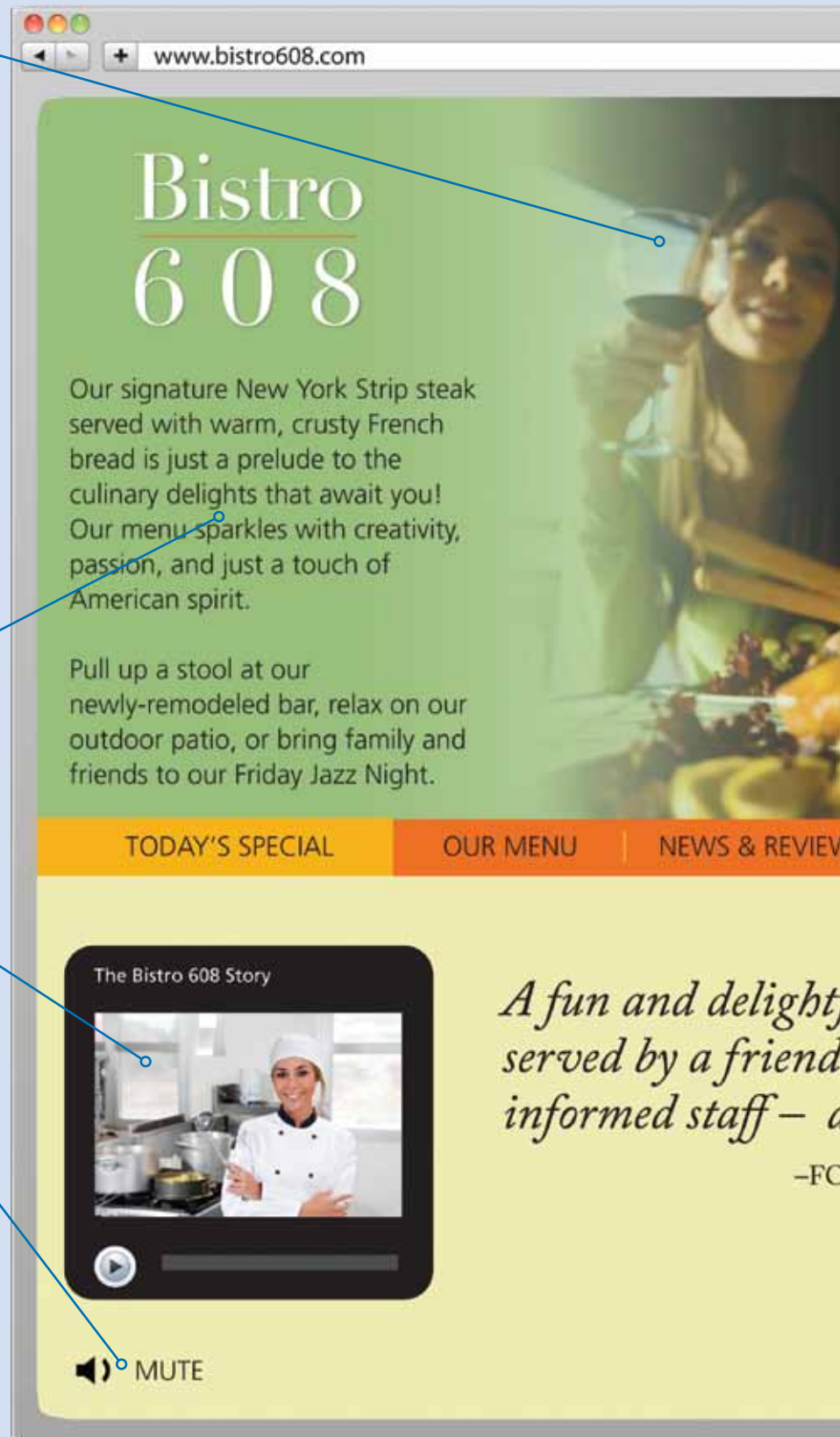
The Elements Of A Great Website

Photos – All the websites that we researched in writing this article had great visuals. Some were static, others dissolved and changed, but all communicated the spirit of the restaurant. And if you offer meeting and banquet rooms, by all means show them to their best advantage with photos. Folks can see a potential site for an event without taking up the time of your staff in having to physically show it to them. It's helpful to make a "shot" list of photos that will show off your restaurant well. This helps you to really think through the process and will also assist your designer or photographer in organizing your web pages. Paying or trading for a really good photographer will make your site stand out. And photos with happy people in them are a lot more communicative than a photo of an empty dining room.

Words – Remember that nanosecond and keep the copy short, but engaging. Anticipate what information someone will need and give it to them. A professional copywriter is a good investment as is a really good proofreader. If you're sloppy about the fine details of your website, a potential customer may think your restaurant won't be top drawer either.

Video – A short, fun video on your home page can succinctly tell the story of your restaurant, and can also communicate the success of a community event that you sponsored.

Music – More and more restaurants are choosing this option. If it makes sense and sets a certain mood that you think works for you, use it. It's nice however to add a mute button, just in case some people are turned off by loud music that comes on when the website is opened.





Online Reservations – There’s software available to add this to your site. The latest stats indicate this is a necessary and profitable way to go. Depending on which software you choose, your customer can receive an automatic confirmation, or you can have someone on staff confirm the reservation by phone or e-mail.

Contact Page – If you ask people to e-mail you with comments or questions, it’s friendlier to attach a real name to your e-mail address rather than have them respond to: info@yourrestaurant.com. Responding in a timely manner leaves a great impression.

Media – If you’ve gotten some good press, include a link to the review or article on your web page. Pull a quote or two and place them strategically on your website for optimum impact. It has also become popular to have a few downloadable, high quality shots of your food and restaurant.

Customer Comments – People love to read what other people have to say about you. It’s human nature, so put in some nice quotes that are current.

Gift Certificates – This option is showing up on more and more restaurant websites. It adds another element that allows interaction, and can even be set up with a PayPal account.

Links – Linking to Facebook, Twitter and other social media is smart cross-marketing. And you may want to link your directions to a Google map and put in a link to your Chamber of Commerce and the Department of Tourism. [WR](#)