

Do You Own Your Online Reputation?

This series is dedicated to ensuring that you, not others, control your online reputation. Why is that important? Because your online reputation is valuable; whoever owns it controls a priceless stake in your business. When you partner with companies for web design, web development, review management or lead generation, you could be paying someone else to take away part of your online presence.

Part One: Is your online marketing partner holding your website hostage?

In this article, we examine those web design companies that offer entry-level websites for a low cost. They offer to build you a basic, SEO friendly website that promises to generate traffic and leads. But what happens when the leads never materialize and you want to leave?

Your online presence & reputation starts with your website and carries into many different areas of the internet. But if you're like many local service professionals, your website has not been your primary marketing focus; you know it should be. That's when you get an offer from a hosting company that offers discount web development services. You're intrigued.

The offers sounds like a phenomenal way to get you started with an online presence. They'll build a search-engine friendly website, add your logo and brand colors, write content, host the site; all with the promise to generate leads for your business. You're supposed to get a slew of potential new customers for a low monthly price. Sounds good, right?

Fast forward a year or even a few months when you realize the leads aren't coming as promised. You're not getting the attention from the web design company you did when they were selling to you. The content is static—it hasn't changed since the day the site was launched. Your search engine rankings have dropped. You're not even getting one lead a month. The money you planned on saving each month is now actually costing you business. Your online presence & reputation are evaporating.

Naturally, you want to take your website to another marketing provider and have them add new content, boost your search engine rankings and generate more leads.

But who owns the website?If you think you do, you may be in for a surprise.

You're not taking your website anywhere. It's not yours. Yes, you've read that correctly.

There are many variations on how this plays out – but they all share one theme – It's actually the web design company's website. Turns out you were just renting it from them on a monthly basis. If you leave their program, you lose the website. You have to start again. Which means your online presence is seriously reduced; you have to build it up again.

This seems like a form of extortion. They use your brand to expand your web presence only to hold it hostage when you want to leave.

If you're like most people, you expect that by paying a company to build your website, they're doing the work for you. That means you should own the completed work, not the online marketing company.

Think of the building you may be renting to run your business. If you chose to leave the building, you take your entire business with you when you go—your desks, office supplies, marketing materials, brand collateral, fleet of trucks, etc. The landlord doesn't keep your stuff and hold it hostage.

So what do you do to take control of your website and, by extension, your entire online presence & reputation?

1. **Investigate:** Before signing a deal with any company, make sure you find out who "owns" the website they will build. Even if they answer "you", make sure there's no marketing "spin". It's important to confirm what happens with the website if, in a year, you want another marketing partner to take over. Make sure you fully understand what happens when you exit your contract.
2. **Invest:** Your online presence & reputation carries into many different corners of the internet, but it starts with your website. For a few dollars a month, you may end up renting a minimal website that is impersonally delivered. But isn't your reputation worth more than a few dollars? For just a bit more, you can own your website and do what's necessary to ensure it's serving your reputation well. Shop around for the deal that works best for you.
3. **Expand:** Even though your online presence & reputation start with your website, it doesn't end there. Make sure your website can accommodate those things that will lend credibility to your reputation—such as reviews, service area maps, staff profile pages and more.

The bottom line: Your website, as well as your complete online reputation, should be yours to control. Make sure whatever company you partner with to help you has your best interests in mind.