

Going home to get more students

In the wake of the internet dot.com boom and bust years, home page design, particularly for small businesses, seems to have now evolved into a marketing tool rather than a money-making operation. Many schools seem to have realized how a well-designed home page can create a good impression at the critical first stage when potential new students are deciding which school to join. In this interview Peter McEntyre discusses his own school's experiences after they launched their home page in August 2000. You may find it more interesting to glance at his website before reading the interview

<http://www.ceres.dti.ne.jp/~pyms/kouala.htm>

Q1) How did you go about designing your school's first web-site?

I have always had an interest in computers and after I got the hang of the web I thought I'd try my hand at web-design for my hobbies and interests. I started my personal web-site initially back in 1998 concentrating on my genealogy. When I opened my school in 2000 I knew from my experience in working at other local schools that none of them had web-pages and that a web presence would give me a professional edge that they lacked. I thought too that it would immediately add prestige and down the track prove fruitful as a cheap and effective advertisement for my school.

I therefore decided to just put up a basic one page school website so that I could put the URL on my business cards, which is what I give to all prospective students. As far as design goes; my school page was originally on a (poorly selected) black background to match my own site. In the end I changed it to a color that is more appealing to my main customer target.

Q2) What expectations did



Peter McEntyre

you have at first?

I think the most important part of the design was to have it easily found by prospective customers. Registering with Eigotown.com quickly got me a few bites, which really surprised me as well as some 'meta-tags' for the search engines to find me. An office lady searching the net at work in Tokyo (in her lunchtime) found my site and as she lived locally was my first E-student catch. I couldn't believe it when she said she found my school on the net as it had only been a month after launching the site. This one student fulfilled all my expectations - a catch. After that I decided to add a few extra pages of information to the site.

Q3) Yes, one of the most attractive points about your home page is that it reaches a nice balance between promotion, entertainment and information. Would you agree that a home page has to offer more than, say, a school brochure in terms of content (I'm thinking in particular of your genealogy section)?

There are definitely far more cheaper options possible with home-pages. A homepage is like a living organism that can grow and change. Brochures however are dead from the time they are printed to the time they end up in the paper recycling truck. I would love a nice professional brochure to have delivered to all

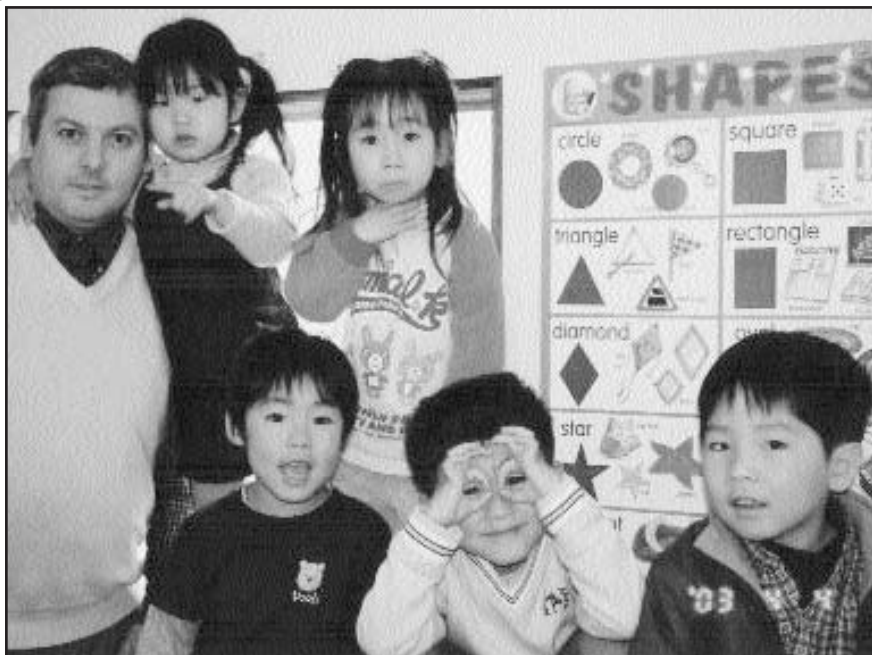
the homes in my area or to give to prospective students, but the production costs are just too much for me to bother with. I want my homepage to be informative to the point that it creates an interest; be that an email enquiry or a telephone call. Gaining the trust of my customers before they actually meet me is a big hurdle. The genealogy part lets them create an instant relationship in their own minds.

The level of privacy you wish to reveal, though, is another factor you will have to take into consideration. I wonder sometimes whether I'm telling my competitors too much. Yet my philosophy has always been 'to have no secrets'. Give too much information and students may find an excuse not to join. Give too little and they will go elsewhere. Finding a suitable balance may be a game of trial & error. The site will always be a work in progress and that is the good thing about them; you can change them so quickly, unlike a brochure.

As for entertainment! In time I'd like to have some more interactive options, be that a game or a lesson download for instance. Currently there is no need for those kinds of bells or whistles.

Q4) I guess that updating the site takes up a lot of time?





Peter with some Koala Kids.

One thing I have learnt about building a website is that the bigger it gets and the more links and information you put into it, the harder it gets to control it. You have to be careful not to let your homepage get too big or confusing. The best analogy I can think of is to treat it like a bonsai. As it grows, trim off the branches that are not needed and make small improvements every now and again.

Q5) Your homepage also includes details of your weekly schedule and which classes are full etc. Have you thought about taking this a stage further and having an online appointment system for some classes?

I haven't thought about that at all, and am not sure if my school is big enough to warrant that kind of interactivity. However, you have given me an idea to add a yearly calendar to my site soon, which will show the holidays for KOALA. Thanks!

Some of my students email me on my mobile phone, for cancellations or questions, or even homework. That seems to be more convenient than having to go online & boot up the computer. Sending private students homework to their mobile

phones or small speeches to memorize are a good little exercise for them to do on the train or in their lunch breaks as well.

Q6) What kinds of outside, technical, help have you sought?

None really. For the slide shows I asked many people how to do it, but the responses I got were too complicated or not what I had in mind. If you know how to use Google all the technical advice you need is there for the picking. You just have to search & read.

Q7) Finally, could you list briefly the benefits which you feel your home page have brought to your school?

1) PRICE

The most important benefit is that homepages are so cheap. If you already have an email address through a provider then it is most likely that your provider already has reserved about 25MB of space for you to build your own web site. That is 'free' space for you to utilise. Money I save on advertising goes into buying classroom materials, books, CD's etc.

2) APPEAL

A homepage gives my 'small'

school a professional touch that shows people that you don't have to go to 'BIG' schools to find modern technology. I think it shows people that I know about more than just teaching English, that I have other interests and abilities.

3) COVERAGE

It gives me worldwide advertising which may be over-kill, but yesterday I picked up a student who lives about 10 kilometers away because she found me through my homepage. I would never have advertised my school in her area.

I think that my homepage has contributed to about 10% of my student population. That is the cream on the cake!

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ETJ Journal's resident columnist on all matters technical, Tom Robb, added these tips to anybody about to start their own website.

Some pointers on getting started.

1) Check your e-mail provider first. Some have a "quick 'n easy" way to mount a homepage without you having to understand any HTML coding at all. Otherwise, consider geocities.yahoo.com which makes it simple. You can get an advert-free site for less than \$10/month.

2) Don't be fooled by providers that offer free domain registration. THEY will own the domain name, not you. If you decide to change providers, you will have to give up your established name — not a good idea. You can get your own domain name for less than \$10/year. Check out <http://www.godaddy.com>.

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Since the interview was completed Peter's homepage has undergone a few updates, including the addition of a CHATROOM, of which Peter himself reasoned, "it's for students to come in and practice their English with people from all over the world. You can't do that with other advertising media."