

Service called key to Web developer's success

Written by

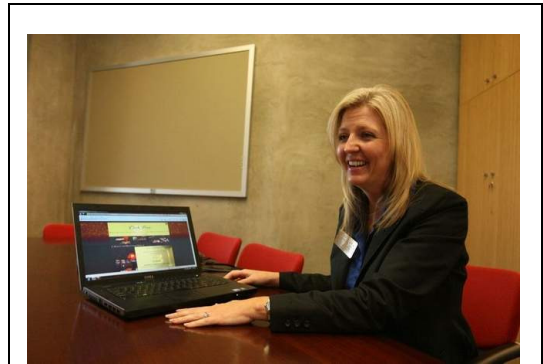
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Ask Stacy Thetford what she likes best about running a successful website design business — Thetford Web Development of Cathedral City — and the answer you get is surprisingly non-geeky.

“I absolutely love meeting with different people from different businesses and being able to learn about their business and then being able to help them in many different ways,” she said.

“I love that we learn something new every single day.” Thetford said she also likes the techie side of her business, but it is likely her strong commitment to customer service that has helped her build an impressive client list, ranging from the Desert Barber Shop in Cathedral City to Fayetteville Technical Community College in North Carolina.



Stacy Thetford of Thetford Web Development talks about her business. Thetford is also on the Palm Desert Chamber of Commerce board of directors. / Crystal Chatham, The Desert Sun

“There's always issues and problems that come up in any business, but it's how you handle them that makes you different,” she said. “When you have a problem, you own it, you deal with it, you turn it around. That's really what makes a difference in customer service.”

Thetford, 41, was born in Georgia, but raised in Riverside, where she graduated from Arlington High School.

She picked up her customer service chops and business savvy the old-fashioned way — working her way up the management ladder at the former Ritz-Carlton in Rancho Mirage. She started at the hotel's front desk after moving to the desert in 1988 and left in 1999 as its director of revenue management.

A job with Websites 2000, now Image Marketing Concepts in Palm Desert, introduced her to the field of website design and marketing, and she quickly grasped the Internet's potential for helping businesses grow.

“A website can sometimes help (a business) with its customers or potential clients,” she said. “A lot of times, it can also help them streamline their processes and become more efficient.”

Thetford eventually decided to go out on her own, launching Thetford Web Development in January 2006. She now has six full-time employees and a roster of four to six contractors she calls in, depending on the company's work load.

To mark the firm's fifth anniversary, she sat down with The Desert Sun to discuss the digital market in the valley, the constantly changing technology in the field and how she has used her local network to build a business with a national footprint.

The Desert Sun: Obviously there have been huge changes in the digital marketplace in the past decade. How web savvy are valley businesses in general?

Stacy Thetford: When I first started in '99 and went out and talked to businesses, they would look at me like I was an alien when I asked if they had a website or needed a website. They weren't jumping on board quickly.

Now I think businesses understand that they need to have one, and the problem is I still don't quite think that businesses understand the value of websites and sometimes try to do it themselves.

You usually get what you pay for.

What about Facebook and social media overall — how important are they now?

I've seen some businesses do very well with their Facebook page, businesses that are event-driven, that need to touch a lot of people. You can put (information) on your website, which is a great place to be, but Facebook takes it a step further. You have people who are signing up who are truly interested in what you have to say, and they're your audience.

What have you learned over the past five years about running a business? What has helped you to keep going and succeed?

Actually, my involvement at the (Palm Desert) Chamber of Commerce; I've been on the board for six years.

I had a lot of encouragement to start my business from business people I met through the chamber, great friends and associates who helped me with business plans and marketing ideas. I really turned to the community for their expertise.

Again, the building of the company has really focused on customer service. Websites are websites; they're technical. There are lots of people that can do it, but we look at ourselves as partners to our clients to help them succeed.

Web design has traditionally had that geeky and mostly male profile. How has it been for you as a woman in the field?

I have not had any incidents (with sexism), mostly I suspect because I'm someone, if I don't have the answer, I'm not going to (bluff) my way through and tell you I have the answer.

This field grows so quickly, I can't possibly keep up with everything. If I have a customer who comes to me and asks me for something I haven't heard about before or am not really aware of yet, I'll do the research and find out because if it's out there, we can do it.

How did the recession affect your business? How are things going now?

The economy did not affect us too much. In 2009, the amount of new clients I picked up was significantly less, but 2010 again picked up with new clients. In 2011, already I'm seeing a lot of interest in new business and people starting to look at the redesigns as well.

I feel we're moving in the right direction, but it's a little slow.

What is your management style?

A team environment is very important. I like to give my team the tools to do their job and let them do their job. They feel more ownership and want to do a better job when you make them feel part of the team.

I do have high expectations. I want to make sure we are delivering the right customer service but still be available for any questions and always be approachable and available to our team.

Where do you see things going in the digital marketplace? What's going to be the next big thing?

I don't know exactly; it's constantly changing. Obviously over the past few years, the big buzz has been social media. I think mobile is going to just continue to grow, and you're going to have to adapt to make sure your website is effective on a mobile phone.

We're in the middle of redesigning our website; I make sure we redesign every two years. It's designed well but it doesn't necessarily fill every screen you look at.

The thing with websites, every screen resolution is different, every browser makes a difference. I want to make sure it fills every screen.

In addition to the Palm Desert Chamber, you're also on the advisory board of the Desert Commercial Bank. How do you balance your work life, community commitments and your family life?

It's a struggle every day. I am such a workaholic, I have to make myself take time off. I have to schedule time for me.

I've learned to say no sometimes. I love to give, give, give; there are times when I'm giving and other things are sacrificed. I've had to learn to say no and pick things more cautiously.

K Kaufmann covers retail, energy and green technology, health care and agriculture for The Desert Sun. She can be reached at k.kaufmann@thedesertsun.com or (760) 778-4622.

Stacy Thetford

Born: 1969, Georgia

Education: Arlington High School, Riverside, 1987.

Professional: Ritz-Carlton, 1988-1999; Websites 2000 (now Image Marketing Concepts), 1999-2005; Thetford Web Development, 2006-present.

Community: Palm Desert Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, Desert Commercial Bank Advisory Board.

Personal: Lives in Cathedral City; married to Chief Deputy Steve Thetford of the Riverside County Sheriff's Department; two children.

Web dos and don'ts

What makes a good business website? Here are some recommendations from Stacy Thetford of Thetford Web Development.

Don't do it yourself: Website development is complex, requiring more than DIY software, Thetford said. "Small businesses get into the mind-set of 'I've got to save money. I've got to make sure I'm controlling everything.' You don't really save money in the end if (a website) isn't bringing you business."

An effective website is appealing, attractive and user-friendly: "You have about 7 to 10 seconds to grab someone's attention. Can they tell within a couple of seconds what you do? Today, people don't have patience; they need snapshots, headlines, things that grab their attention."

Yes to videos; no to Flash: "If you have an all-Flash website, your iPad is not going to see it."

Consider search engine optimization: "There are millions and millions of websites; you have to have the text to help the search engines find you." Writers who produce content-rich copy know how to embed certain words, phrases and coding in a site so the search engines can find it.

Include a call to action: "Call us for a free consultation; sign up for our newsletter. There needs to be a call to action. Instead of just looking at a site, what are you going to do?"