

Machine Quilting Web Sites

These are thoughts, opinions, observations and experiences related to the use of a web site in our quilting business. This is a record of our experiences and this information is stored for reference by other quilters considering a web for use in their business. The **Do WEB Sites Work?** article was written two weeks after moving our web site to a commercial location and it covers questions and activities prior to that point in time. It was submitted to the LongArm Digest but could not be posted because it exceeded the 10 Kb posting limit of the list ISP. The **Results, Lessons Learned** and **Additional Uses and Considerations** sections are subject areas for recording subsequent information. The data in the **Results** section has been summarized from a detail file and shows the monthly statistics of the customers generated by the web site.

Subject: Do WEB Sites Work?

Date: Tue, 09 Jun 1998 22:14:57 -0700

From: George Goumas <ggoumas@hookedonquilts.com>

To: LongArm Digest <longarm@quiltropolis.com>

After 4 months of developing and revising our web site, I thought I would share the following with you. I do not consider myself an expert on this subject but I have developed some thoughts and opinions.

As two of the "newer kids on the block", my wife and I have searched and visited a lot of quilting web sites to see what others had and to get ideas for our own. Some sites were very simple with very little more than the business name, address & phone number and email address. Others had pictures of quilts and lots of descriptive text. Still others were more elaborate with lots of cute animations and some even had music. What was noticeably lacking was web sites of industrial machine (LongArm) quilters. So as we put together our business plan we were faced with the following basic questions:

1. Did we need a web site - especially if few other LongArm quilters had them?
2. Does a quilting web site work, get us business and pay for itself?
3. What type of site location did we need - a commercial or a personal member site some providers had?
4. Should we develop the site ourselves or hire a web consultant?
5. Are they worth the cost, time of building and maintaining?
6. What information should it have - pictures, prices, descriptive text - how much, mix of each?
7. If we developed it ourselves, what software and equipment did we need - i.e. scanner, camera, color printer?

The decision was made to develop the web pages ourselves and put it on a commercial site. Development began in February and June was targeted for the move to a commercial location from our personal location. Our plan included the support cost for a year (later amended to two years) A basic format was selected using as many pictures of quilts as we could put together, with more descriptive text to be added later. Microsoft's FrontPage was selected as the software and it was purchased. A scanner, color printer and later, a digital camera, were also purchased.

On May 27th we moved our web to it's new home location on our provider and began the process of registration with some of the major search engines.

Now, two weeks later, do I have answers to any of the above questions? No, it's too early for most. And yes I have opinions on some and had reinforcement on others I had previously formulated.

I believe all of us need a commercial web site for our business. That opinion was reinforced by email and long-distance phone queries requesting information and clarification on our prices - one from a lady in Oregon (and we are officially located on only two search engines of the 27 we submitted for listing) and a second from Michigan. You never know who is out there searching for our services. Between February and the end of May we had 567 "hits" on our old home page site by just the people we notified of its location. In just two weeks now we've had over 450 hits on our new home site location. You can't get the business

Machine Quilting Web Sites

unless people can find you and read you pages. Personal recommendations can only go so far.

I also believe any of the ladies on this list can develop their own web site. Believe me, I was in sales and marketing all my life and the artistic talent I've seen by quilters, reinforces this opinion. Everyone on the list has a computer. If you have a computer, you can develop a web site. There is lots of web building software on the market that is user friendly and you can have something up on a server in just a few days. Developing your own side gives you flexibility of changing without the cost of a web consultant. At Springfield we decided we needed to change our company name to associate it more with our business. When we returned we did a domain name search and settled on our current name, made arrangements to change our business license, arranged for domain name registration, and changed all our web pages to reflect the new name. This process took about a week.

What should be the format and content of the web site? I believe it should include picture of our product - quilting. It should include a price list for our services. Your web pages should load fast - limit the use of cute animations. Some are ok, but too many are distracting. My first web (which nobody ever saw) had lots of cute animated figures, scrolling banners, etc., to "entertain" the visitor. I looked at it for a week and kept asking myself, "what did it sell?" My answer was nothing and it took longer to load the pages. I believe a visitor will leave if it takes too long to see the results of a selection. I know when I visit a site, if a page is not loaded in 5 seconds, I'm gone. I still have too many animations on our pages and they will be replaced when I find something I like to replace them. My opening "Favorites" page still takes way too long to load and I'm in the process of making several pages out of the one. You should have seen the original page. It includes all of the information now found on the separate Favorite pages and it took three minutes to load. I think it was best summed up the query we received today where she stated:

"By the way, the site is great, keep the focus on clear text and not too many 'dancing bears' and stuff and you'll see lots of traffic!!"

What about using a lot of pictures? Doesn't it slow down page loading? Yes, but if you use "thumbnail" pictures it will not annoy the visitor as much as a full size picture loading. What format and size should the full size picture be? Pictures should be in JPEG format for maximum compression. Full Size? Prior to this weekend, I would have said 640x480. But I took some pictures with the digital camera at a party we attended. When we viewed the pictures on a laptop (one guy carries his around his car), we discovered this size was too big for his screen display. The next day I experimented with picture sizes and found if you just reduce the size slightly, from 640x480 to 550x412, you can cut the file size for the picture in half and thus much faster loading on the web.

The rest of the questions, only time will tell.

Consider this when you think about a web site. We got into this business to make money. To make money you need the tools to run your business. Web sites should be viewed as a tool just like your quilting machines.

If anyone thinks they would like to build their own site, I would recommend the following magazine:
PC Novice Guide Series - Building Web Sites
I found it at Barnes & Nobel for \$5.95.

George
Hooked On Quilts
Gammill Optimum

Machine Quilting Web Sites

Results

- 05/27/98 Web moved from personal site location to commercial location on our provider.
- 06/09/98 First email business inquiry after moving web to commercial site location. Lady from OR requesting additional price info for services.
- 06/10/98 First business as result of web site. The lady from MI called to discuss her quilt requirements and told us she was sending quilt top.
- 06/18/98 Three weeks after move to commercial site. 806 "hits" on Home page counter. Several additional phone and email requests for information. If verbal commitments truly materialize and tops have been sent as we were told, we have 4 new out-of-state customers and 1 new local that is bringing top to us.
- 06/19/98 First quilt top, new business generated by the web, arrives via UPS from MI.
- 06/20/98 Second quilt top, new business generated by the web, arrives via Priority Mail from VA
- 06/27/98 One month after move to commercial site. 1140 "hits" on Home page counter. Visitor counter understated because many are going directly to another page from external link or from personal "bookmark". During the month we had received verbal/note commitments from 6 people (5 out-of-state, 1 local). Four said they would ship immediately or within two weeks, one said 4-5 weeks and the local was going to drop it off. As of this date, we've received 3 quilts and awaiting another 3. Requests for information reduced by changes to "Service Prices" and "Quilting Order Form" pages (still needs additional work).
- 07/27/98 Two months after move to commercial site. 2226 "hits" on Home page counter. Total new customers from web site now at 10 with 11 quilts received. Have received verbal/note commitments for 4 additional quilts -- 2 from our new customers and 1 from friend of new customer.
- 08/27/98 Three months after move to commercial site. 3234 "hits" on Home page counter. Total new customers from web site now at 16 (1 from Germany) with 21 quilts received. Web quilting customers are located in 7 different states (CA, CT, IL, MI, NM, TX, and VA) and one International customer from Germany. Orders for custom quilts as result of web now 5.
- 09/27/98 Four months after move to commercial site. 4036 "hits" on Home page counter. Total new customers from web site now at 18 (1 from Germany) with 24 quilts received. Web quilting customers are located in 8 different states (CA, CT, IL, NJ, MI, NM, TX, and VA) and one International customer from Germany. Orders for custom quilts as result of web now 7.
- 10/27/98 Five months after move to commercial site. 5013 "hits" on Home page counter. Total new customers from web site now at 22 (1 from Germany) with 29 quilts received. Web quilting customers are located in 11 different states (CA, CT, IL, NJ, NM, NY, MI, OK, TX, VA and WA) and one International customer from Germany. Orders for custom quilts as result of web now 10.
- 11/27/98 Six months after move to commercial site. 5920 "hits" on Home page counter. Total new customers from web site now at 26 (1 from Germany) with 38 quilts received. Web quilting customers are located in 11 different states (CA, CT, IL, NJ, NM, NY, MI, OK, TX, VA and WA) and one International customer from Germany. Orders for custom quilts as result of web now 14. Also received notice from 1 list and 1 search engine that our site had been added without our requesting.

Machine Quilting Web Sites

- 12/27/98 Seven months after move to commercial site. 6793 "hits" on Home page counter. Total new customers from web site now at 31 (1 from Germany) with 46 quilts received. Web quilting customers are located in 13 different states (AZ, CA, CT, IL, NJ, NM, NY, MI, OK, TX, VA, WA and WY) and one International customer from Germany. Orders for custom quilts as result of web now 17. Also received notice from another search engine that our site had been added without our requesting.
- 01/27/99 Eight months after move to commercial site. 8175 "hits" on Home page counter. Total new customers from web site now at 34 (1 from Germany) with 55 quilts received. Web quilting customers are located in 14 different states (AZ, CA, CT, IL, NJ, NM, NV, NY, MI, OK, TX, VA, WA and WY), WDC and one International customer from Germany. Orders for custom quilts as result of web now 20.
- 02/27/99 Nine months after move to commercial site. 9433 "hits" on Home page counter. Total new customers from web site now at 39 (1 from Germany) with 75 quilts received. Web quilting customers are located in 16 different states (AZ, CA, CT, FL, IL, NJ, NM, NV, NY, MI, OK, PA, TX, VA, WA and WY), WDC and one International customer from Germany. Orders for custom quilts as result of web now 25.
- 03/27/99 Ten months after move to commercial site. 10213 "hits" on Home page counter. Total new customers from web site now at 43 (1 from Germany) with 83 quilts received. Web quilting customers are located in 16 different states (AZ, CA, CT, FL, IL, NJ, NM, NV, NY, MI, OK, PA, TX, VA, WA and WY), WDC and one International customer from Germany. Orders for custom quilts as result of web now 26.
- 04/27/99 Eleven months after move to commercial site. 10909 "hits" on Home page counter. Total new customers from web site now at 47 (1 from Germany) with 95 quilts received. Web quilting customers are located in 17 different states (AZ, CA, CT, FL, HI, IL, NJ, NM, NV, NY, MI, OK, PA, TX, VA, WA and WY), WDC and one International customer from Germany. Orders for custom quilts as result of web now 27.
- 05/27/99 One year after move to commercial site. 11604 "hits" on Home page counter. Total new customers from web site now at 53 (1 from Germany) with 103 quilts received. Web quilting customers are located in 17 different states (AZ, CA, CT, FL, HI, IL, NJ, NM, NV, NY, MI, OK, PA, TX, VA, WA and WY), WDC and one International customer from Germany. Orders for custom quilts as result of web now 34. (Reflects business being shut down 1 week for vacation trip)
- 06/27/99 Thirteen months after move to commercial site. 12197 "hits" on Home page counter. Total new customers from web site now at 57 (1 from Germany) with 109 quilts received. Web quilting customers are located in 17 different states (AZ, CA, CT, FL, HI, IL, NJ, NM, NV, NY, MI, OK, PA, TX, VA, WA and WY), WDC and one International customer from Germany. Orders for custom quilts as result of web now 35. (Reflects business being shut down 3 weeks for vacation and MQS trips)
- 07/27/99 Fourteen months after move to commercial site. 13039 "hits" on Home page counter. Total new customers from web site now at 66 (1 from Germany) with 131 quilts received. Web quilting customers are located in 17 different states (AZ, CA, CT, FL, HI, IL, NJ, NM, NV, NY, MI, OK, PA, TX, VA, WA and WY), WDC and one International customer from Germany. Orders for custom quilts as result of web now 40. (Note: In 40 days since returning from MQS, we received a total of 68 quilts and as of this date we are scheduled through the end of the year.)
- 08/27/99 Fifteen months after move to commercial site. 13,963 "hits" on Home page counter. Total new customers from web site now at 70 (1 from Germany) with 138 quilts received. Web quilting customers are located in 17 different states (AZ, CA, CT, FL, HI, IL, NJ, NM, NV, NY, MI, OK, PA, TX, VA, WA and WY), WDC and two international customers - 1 from Germany and 1 from Canada. Orders for custom quilts as result of web now 40.

Machine Quilting Web Sites

(Notes: In 71 days since returning from MQS, we received a total of 111 quilts. On-line brochures starting to bring in business. Local quilt teachers and shops referrals generating new business. Having to turn down some custom quilt orders because of backlog and requested delivery dates. Acquisition of second machine being discussed.)

09/27/99 Sixteen months after move to commercial site. 14,904 "hits" on Home page counter. Total new customers from web site now at 73 (1 from Germany) with 146 quilts received. Web quilting customers are located in 17 different states (AZ, CA, CT, FL, HI, IL, NJ, NM, NV, NY, MI, OK, PA, TX, VA, WA and WY), WDC and three international customers - 1 from Germany, 1 from Canada and 1 from Guam. Orders for custom quilts as result of web now 40.

(Notes: In 102 days since returning from MQS, we received a total of 148 quilts. This may be the last entry for this business track because of our backlog and we're turning down business we can't accommodate for the Christmas season.)

Machine Quilting Web Sites

Lessons Learned

1. Additional work needed on initial service price list web page for clarity -- some confusion.
2. A page is needed for prices of quilts and other items displayed on the web -- suggestion from several web visitors. Even if quilts are already sold, pictures and prices may generate new business demand for custom quilts.
3. It's a good idea to have a web page with a shipping mail label for customer to use -- was used on packages from 1st and 2nd quilt tops shipped to us from out-of-state.
4. It's also a good idea to have a web page containing your business card or replica -- 2 people looking for information said, although they were not yet ready to send top, would print/cut out card for future reference.
5. Pictures of quilts on a web serve 4 purposes:
 - a. Displays quilts you may want to sell
 - b. Displays your quilting capability
 - c. Provides examples of quilting patterns for your customer to select and discuss for their project
 - d. If you include those of your quilting customers, provides them additional visibility, exposure, and work (and ultimately work for you)
6. Good pictures of quilts are difficult to obtain and use in a web. Taking pictures indoors and using a flash will wash out some colors and quilting patterns. Natural light at an oblique angle will give good results of colors and quilting -- angle and stitching creates shadows to illustrate quilting. Avoid using white backgrounds. Taking pictures using regular camera and scanning-in process is costly and time-consuming. Many times you will take pictures of quilts and after they are processed you find they are of little use for web pages. Some scanners will not produce required sharp images required for web image. Best and immediate results for review is obtained using digital camera. Initial purchase cost of camera is returned quickly from savings in picture processing costs and your time in conversion to suitable web image file. A digital camera takes practice like any other tool.

A special quilt rack is useful for taking pictures. Initial rack design was six feet high and eight feet long and made using redwood 4x4's and closet poles. Use thoroughly dried redwood to make unit light and easy to move and transport. Base legs are 24 inches long and made using 1/2-inch plywood. Legs are attached using bolts and wing nuts. Sand, seal and paint wood. Four holes were drilled in the 4x4s to enable using four poles when the unit is used at local craft shows to display quilts.
7. If your web contains pictures of your customer's quilts, you may generate additional business for them and yourself.
8. A "Guest Book" is needed to record comments and suggestions from visitors.
9. A hidden web page should be set up to display progress/completed quilt to customer. This page is only used for customers that cannot receive pictures/graphics via email. Some emails also have limit on total file sizes that can be received and pictures files could be 30-60 Kb each.
10. Avoid getting hooked into web page contests. Most only want you to display a big icon on your page with link to theirs. If you fall into this trap, you are selling their web and giving them free advertising.
11. Registrations with search engines require follow-up and re-registration. After going through the initial registration process for 27, only showed up on 9 after a month later.
12. It's a good idea to have a web page containing quilting patterns in addition to pictures.
13. It's also a good idea to have a web page containing Quilt Preparation and Shipping Instructions.
14. If you plan on having many web pages and using a lot of pictures in your web site, be sure to select a service provider and type of web site account that will give you lots of room for expansion. My experience has taught me that 25-30 MB of storage is required if you plan on building a large web site.

Machine Quilting Web Sites

Our original web was developed on a free personal site and then moved to a commercial site. The personal site had 6 MB of storage and the commercial site had 10 MB of storage. In the middle of the third month on the commercial site I suddenly found I was exceeding the 10 MB storage limit and facing high extra storage. Checking with my provider revealed that the next size commercial site was for small corporations and very expensive so I was faced with finding new service provider, removing pages and pictures from the site, or looking for a temporary solution.

After more discussions with my provider, the decision was made to remain with the provider for the time being and to "split" the web site between the commercial site and the personal site. A logical split was identified and pages and picture files were moved. The special web coding for the split resulted in some problems when developing on the home computer but the user is not aware they are viewing two sites. This temporary solution bought some time to research other providers and charges for their commercial accounts.

15. Discounts to customers that refer other quilting customers to you stimulate additional business. Using business card stock, coupons were printed and given to customers
16. Using business card stock, discount coupons were printed and given to customers that have given us several quilts. They appreciated the thought of saving money.
17. Maintain file of notes for everyone that requests information or quotes. Some have come back as long as 8 months after initial contact.
18. It's a good idea to have separate pages for information related to Quilting Services and ordering Custom Quilts.
19. It's a good idea to print up lots of flyers to have on hand for quilt shops and quilting teachers.
20. The use of Acrobat formatted PDF files in conjunction with Web pages provides you additional viewing and printing capability for you web visitor. The use of PDF files enables the visitor the ability to view, print or download your brochure. This ability reduces email traffic and postage costs.

Another advantage of the use of PDF files is some printing places, like Kinko's, can take your PDF files and print from them. You can avoid some setup costs and having to provide color separations for things like pictures in color brochures and your logo on your business cards. When you use PDF files there is no chance for difference in font sizes and layouts because the files contain complete printing instructions, fonts and pictures.

Machine Quilting Web Sites

Additional Uses and Considerations

1. How do you give credit to your quilt customers? When you have a web which displays pictures of quilts of your own and customers, what is the best way to not to take credit away from your customers?
2. The use of a hidden web page could be used to display a completed quilt to an out-of-state customer prior to shipping.
3. Those in the business a long time have recommend taking pictures of completed customer quilts for your files.
4. Is the 25% deposit we request upon receipt of quilt correct or should it be higher? Shipping and insurance is not known until quilt completed and packed. (We have been cautioned about returning completed quilts without receipt of balance amount). Final balance difficult to unless prior discussion on shipping method and insurance amount -- may need to be added to "Quilting Order Form".
5. New customer suggested the addition of a "Testimonial" or "Customer Comments" web page. This is used to display comments enclosed in email or letters instead of posting to Guestbook. Permission to use would first have to be obtained.
6. Several of our quilting customers sell quilts at local craft shows and others have commented about wanting to make some extra money making and selling quilts. Perhaps a web page could be added to display these quilts.