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## ONLINE

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### A Retailer's Step-by-Step Guide to Creating a Website

By Dana Robinson

**You can start an online lingerie boutique ... here's how.**



Starting an online retail site is much easier than you think. **Nina Grossman Warner**, owner of **Bittersweet Butterfly** in Silverlake, Calif., did it, and she shared with IAB a few simple steps to make your e-tailing dreams a reality.

1. Figure out how you want to present your merchandise. Warner categorizes her online wares by designer, but there are some sites that list options by sizes or styles. Choose which is right for your business, or offer several sorting options for shoppers.
2. Gather merchandise photos. Posting images of what you're selling is a critical part of enticing customers to buy. You can either call manufacturers for their artwork or take photos yourself with a digital camera.
3. Find a Web designer. Warner notes that this is the most challenging part of the process. "You have to find somebody that is not cost prohibitive, but has a good eye and can get the job done," says Warner. "If you just want to post some pictures on your site, that's easy. But to create the online store ... that's where it gets much more complicated." Warner notes that the hunt for a good designer can take about four to six months.

Where does one go to find a good Web site creator? On the Web, of course. Warner found her designer on **Craigslist.com**. "I probably got 500 resumes," she says. "I just weeded through them and found a guy who sounded great, and he really was. He did a fabulous job." Once you've found someone you like, Warner cautions that you should hold off on paying until he or she starts sending you layouts.

That brings us to the question of how much you should pay your Web designer. Warner says the pay rate depends on the level of talent he or she brings to the project and how intricate you want the e-boutique to be. "It will be a long process so maybe you can negotiate ... as you go," says Warner. You can pay a flat fee for constructing the shell of the site, another fee to make changes, etc. She adds that once you get the site up and running, you will probably have to pay your designer an hourly rate to make changes, but she advises against paying an hourly rate to build the site. "That could be astronomically expensive," says Warner.

4. Collaborate. It's *your* Web site, so your designer will definitely need a lot of input from you. Warner estimates that it will take about one to six months of collaboration in order to complete the e-boutique. "[The site creator] sends you a design, and then you make your changes, and that usually takes a while," says Warner. Before you meet with your designer, she suggests going to other online boutiques as well as I.A. sites just to see what's out there and get a sense of the site designs you like and dislike.

It's also a good idea to buy something online to see what the e-commerce ordering process is like. Also make a note of what's lacking on various sites. If you wish you could see each item in every color that it comes in, make sure to include that feature as part of your e-boutique.

5. Write the content. Once you get the general design going, it's time to fill in the blanks with some editorial. This includes not only writing descriptions of the items you're selling, but also creating "attributes," or a pull-down menu that

allows shoppers to select whatever sizes and colors they'd like.

6. Beta testing. Before you release your e-boutique to your adoring public, let your friends and family take it out for a test run. This will allow you to work out any kinks in the system.

7. Promotions. Once your site is perfect, how can you ensure that everyone knows that it exists? "The best thing to do is to sign [up] with a really high-powered search engine like **Citysearch** or **Google**," says Warner. She notes that most sites charge a monthly fee, and the more you pay, the higher your site comes up on the search results. "You can probably expect to pay between \$250 to \$1,000 to each search engine," notes Warner. Once you're in the system, you can monitor the number of hits you get, and decide whether or not you need to upgrade. She advises advertising on several sites (such as **Yelp.com** and **Ask.com**) to get your name out there.

Another way to promote your Web presence is with an e-mail list. If you don't have one, now is a good time to start compiling addresses. It's as simple as asking customers who visit your store to sign up at the cash wrap, or have them drop their business cards into a fish bowl for a weekly raffle (for prizes such as a free meal or a gift basket).

You're probably thinking, "How much is this whole e-boutique thing going to cost me?" Well, that depends. According to Warner, you can get your Web site up and running for anywhere from \$2,000-\$20,000. "But even if you only spend \$2,000...if you get 20 \$100 sales (which you will, probably at least within a year), then you've already paid for it." Warner feels that retailers let their fears get in the way of starting up an online presence. "I think [people] think it's going to be really complicated and it's not going to be worth it," says Warner. "But I think they'll surprise themselves."

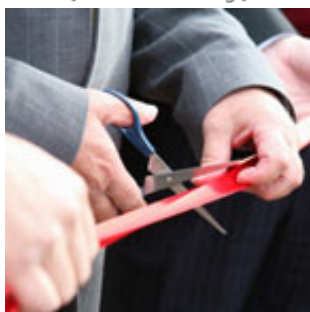
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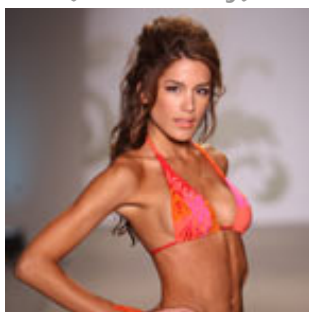
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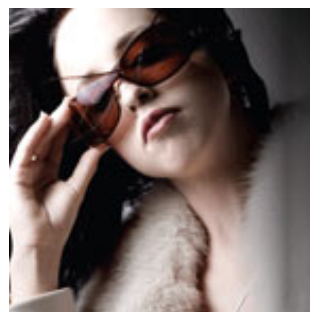
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