

Web Page Design for the Farm/Ranch Recreation Business

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Editor's Note:

This bulletin was written to help farm/ranch recreation operators develop an effective web page. It does not include the nuts and bolts of actually becoming a web master. Operators who wish to design and develop a web site need technical design information that is not included in this bulletin. So, for you operators who merely want someone else to design a web site for your operation and you want to understand some of the jargon spoken by these web site design gurus, read on to gain some ideas we've learned from developing various web sites.



Why a Web Page?

Perhaps you are out in the hinterlands without a computer, or you have a real slow one that came over on the Mayflower, and you're not connected to the internet anyway, and you're wondering why you even need a web page. We'll let you in on a little secret: **YOU ARE NOT THE KIND OF PAYING GUEST YOU SHOULD BE TARGETING TO VISIT A FARM OR RANCH.**

People who want to visit a farm or ranch need to be able to find you using a method that best fits their lifestyle. Browsing the web has become a national past time; therefore, if your guests are looking for farm/ranch recreation operations on the web, you need to explore your options for putting your operation on the web where they can find you and contact you for additional information.

Rule # 1 - people need to see information about a product or service an average of three times before they purchase that product/service. Taking this rule into account, a farm/ranch recreation operator should then decide to do a variety of three or more paid and free promotions. The web is definitely one kind of advertising to consider. It can be less expensive than printed matter and has the potential to reach a broader and more diverse group of US and International travelers.

Evaluating the relative cost-effectiveness of your web site will be an on-going process. If you remember the "three-times rule," you should always ask a variety of questions when you book a reservation...because you will want to know how effective your marketing dollars are for actual bookings. Try to tactfully find out which three forms of promotions or advertising they actually used to make their decision. Some scenarios which are fairly common:

- 1. The guest may have heard from a friend about your operation, then went to your web site.
- 2. The guest read an ad, then went to the web site.
- 3. The guest was surfing the web and read your ad, then received your brochure from the travel commission.
- 4. The guest was surfing the web and read your ad, then called you and you were so hospitable.



Rule # 2 - don't pay for anything you can get free. The tourism department is a colleague, not a competitor, so they will be glad to help you. Besides, it's their job to promote tourism. The web 'surfer' who contacted your local/state travel department looking for information may be the same person who will be looking for your web site.

Who is the Target Guest?

Before you can even begin to develop a web page or talk to a company who offers web site housing and design, you need to identify the guest who will be using the web to find out about farm/ranch recreation opportunities. This will tell you what your web page should look like. First impressions are always important.

First, call your local or state travel/tourism department. Ask questions about those who contacted them via the email located on the tourism department's web site. Tourism departments also collect all kinds of demographic data on their inquirers. Obtaining data helps tourism departments do a better job of designing their own promotional efforts such as web sites, brochures, TV, or radio. Gathering a bit of free data about the people visiting your area before beginning to design your web site will probably take a couple of phone calls or a visit to the local chamber of commerce.

Rule # 3 - if you want your guests to enjoy themselves and you want to enjoy having them as guests, only "invite/promote" the kind of paying guests you will enjoy having as your guests.

Now it's time to play 'let's pretend.' You learned from your tourism department something about the kinds of people asking about tourism in your area. And you promoted yourself to the department... you offer horseback riding, hunting, fishing, agricultural tours...or whatever it is you do offer.

Pretend You are a Potential Guest

So, pretend you are the potential guest and you want to surf the web for a farm/ranch recreation operation in your area. Oops! You personally don't have a computer? Remember, most of your guests will have a computer, so you need to find a computer. Pretend to be looking for a farm/ranch recreation operation before you can even think about putting together your thoughts for the designing of a web site

- 🐾 Go to the local library to use their computers to surf the web.
- 🐾 Stop by the County Extension office to get advice on where to use a computer.
- 🐾 Check with the local chamber of commerce to use a computer.



Local professionals are usually glad to help. You can help increase their job satisfaction if they feel they are helping to bring business into their local community.

Use the 'Search' tool on the web and type in the 'key words' you, the tourism department, the extension educator or librarian came up with. First, working from major categories key in:

- 🐾 Wyoming (whichever state you live in) tourism
- 🐾 farm vacations
- 🐾 ranch recreation
- 🐾 agricultural tours

Next search for a specific activity:

- 🐾 fishing
- 🐾 horseback riding
- 🐾 nature photography

You will get a bunch of suggested sites (most of which are completely irrelevant). But, read the titles and look at the ones that appear to be interesting. This takes time, but your potential guests who like to use the web don't mind taking the time.

If you do get frustrated by all the irrelevant 'hits,' take a look at some of the web sites listed on the national database for farm and ranches involved in some aspect of recreation; www.farm-ranch-recreation.com www.ranchrecr.org. Other sites you might visit: www.shoopfarm.20m.com, www.ranch-web.com, or www.agrotours.com.

What were your first impressions? What caught your eye (e.g., the general appearance or something within the home page)? What pictures did you see or words did you read that made you want to see more? Choose the most favorable features of the web sites you like and then tell the web site designer you want your web site to include those features. If you don't get what you asked for, don't pay.

Rule # 4 - if you don't know or ask for what you want on your web site and why, you will probably get sold something you don't like, won't use, and can't trade in.

Before You Ever Talk to a Web Page Designer/Master

Create Folders

Start getting yourself organized. To some of us, the word "folder" means one of those manila things we keep in a file cabinet. To the computer person, it means an icon found in the 'save' area of the computer memory. Whichever you prefer is okay, but first you are physically going to have to put some items together such as:

Photographs and Graphics Folder

Remember you are in the people business now, so avoid those lovely pictures with your favorite old horse standing alone in the green pasture; find or take new ones with a person riding your favorite old horse or petting him with a big smile on her face (the rider, not the horse). Your customer can relate to this concept.

In the graphics area put in a copy of your logo and line drawings such as a simple map or even something about your place... like buildings.

Written Information Folder

This can include, but is not limited to; a) history of your farm or ranch, b) size and location, c) family information, d) activities, e) prices, etc. What similar information did you enjoy reading while surfing the web and looking at farm/ranch recreation sites? What makes your place different and/or more appealing than those other places? You won't use it all, but you may need it for updates and the more you have to select from, the easier.

Size and Location of Pictures and Graphics

Bigger is not always better when it comes to pictures and graphics. It takes an internet link quite a while to pull up a web page with graphics. High speed lines are still not the norm, so be cautious when using pictures.

One picture or graphic per page plus the written text will be the best. A good way to handle a picture story of your operation is to allow the viewer to click on an icon to take them to a page with pictures. The viewer will then realize it will take a while to pull up the page. This will be for the serious customer who wants to take a look at the interior of the cabins or your home and get a sneak preview of the landscape and animals. Check out the web site, www.uwyo.edu/ranchrecre www.farm-ranch-recreation.com, and look at the picture pages located in the barn. Also, check out www.windriverranch.com for their photo tour.



Update Regularly

If you have someone else house your web site, find out how often you can update and what each update will cost. Your business may have some special events which need to be featured three or four months in advance. An old web site with dated information will turn potential customers away.

"Narrowly" Offer the Text

When reading a newspaper we often skim while we read. This same reading technique is often used on a web site because reading across the screen can be tedious. Therefore, formatting your text in column form or in small boxes will be easier to read.

Use a Descriptive Title

Don't be too clever with the title of your web site. If you use a farm/ranch recreation company that hosts different sites, you won't have a problem because each company has its own key words. When deciding on which group to put your page with, see if you can find their site. Go to the 'search' on a computer when connected to the web and put in key words like 'ranch recreation', 'ranch vacation', 'farm vacation', and look

at the results. If a web site is not linked to the appropriate search engines, no one will ever find that web page. It is easy to get the right key words in your description in order for the web surfers to find your site. Just make sure it's done.

White Space and Color

Use white space on a computer screen sparingly. You need some white space for your page to look uncluttered, but too much will glare at your customer. A background color is often appropriate. Color contrasts are important, it makes a computer screen easier to read. Also, there are many people who are color blind or need glasses to read...just keep it in mind when deciding on colors.

You're Ready to Talk to a Web Page Designer/Master

👂 Ask about the cost for development, maintenance, domain name registration, and site hosting. The costs can vary greatly. A nice rule of thumb at this time is not to pay more than \$1,000 for web page development. You will have to pay at least \$200 for a basic one pager. Hosting is about \$15.00 per month and a \$10.00 domain name yearly renewal fee.

👂 Ask for samples of their work. Look at the site on a computer.

👂 Ask for references

👂 Ask for an estimate of the time it will take to develop the site and maintain it.

You can always check with some of the other operators (who have sites you like) to find out how much they pay.

Check it Out

This is a hard step for most of us. After the web page is developed, go to several different locations in town and pull up your web page on these computers. You may find the site is great on one computer, but at the library it takes forever to pull up or may even look all scattered with a different font size or with words on top of pictures because of the computer monitor. Your web designer/master will need to know what you discovered and take your suggestions. A web designer/master often will have a high speed phone line and may be way off on knowing what the potential customer has available. Your web site should be written in a language read by all computers.

While you're checking out "the look" of your site, don't forget to proofread. Words can easily be misspelled or even misinterpreted by a web page designer who knows little about your operation.

Definition of Terms

Web site - consists of one or more web pages, and as a whole describes a body of information

Web page designer/master - person who designs and develops a web site

Web page - web pages are the individual elements of a web site

Surf the web - enter key words and allow the computer to search the 'World Wide Web' (www) for information

Search engine - a program that searches documents using specified keywords and returns a list of documents that match the keywords

URL address - registered/official name of the web site

Resources

There are many web site design resources available. Some may be too technical, but are worth a quick browse.

<http://www.reeusda.gov> Use this site to access a variety of web page design helps. Use the E-Answers button and then do a search with such words as web site design, farm/ranch recreation web sites, etc.

<http://colostate.edu/Depts/CoopExt> A good web site puts the needs of its users first. How do you, as a budding webmaster, go about designing a site that puts your users' needs first. Here a few tips from the experts.

<http://personalweb.about.com/library/weekly> This site will send you information about web site design.

<http://burt.unl.edu/elecmainstr/res.htm> Locate a web host and learn how much it will all cost. A wide variety of useful information about web sites is available through this site.

<http://ndsuext.nodak.edu/extpubs/alt-ag.htm> A list of alternative agriculture products and publications.

<http://www.farmworks.com>

<http://www.smallfarm.com>

<http://www.homefarm.com>

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