

## Before Taking the Plunge

### The Fine Points

- **Learn about what goes on behind the page**
- **Learn how effective marketing can lead you astray**
- **Learn how the Web can help -- and how it can't**

In many ways, a plant is like a Web site. Plants require light, water, and nourishment to survive and flourish, and even though a Web site doesn't require these, it requires adequate infrastructure, adequate content, and interest (either of the builder or the audience) to survive and thrive. So before you make the investment in getting on the Web, it's important to have a clear understanding of why you want to be there as well as some knowledge about the infrastructure, and support that it will need to survive (and flourish). Even if you outsource all of the graphic development and programming, there can (and should be) a continuous effort to improve/expand the content of the site due to its marketing benefits. In reality, depending on what the goals of your site are, the generation of this content combined with coordination of contractors can be a full-time job for one to many people. After that, you still need to consider who is going to market the site, and how. Hosting must be set up, as well as an adequate customer service/support area. At this point we haven't even considered site quality assurance, order processing/shipping, or maintaining the infrastructure needed to support the site. It can be a daunting task. However, if you look at your business needs and goals, you may find that even though the Web isn't a perfect fit with your business goals, it is something that must happen.

Unfortunately, another issue muddying the waters is marketing. Not your own, but that of Web development firms. Although it is true that the Web often levels the playing field among large and small companies, the truth is that this typically isn't accomplished through buying the best looking site or having the newest technology. Rather, small businesses can compete effectively with larger companies on the Web when they have a quality product or service, solid marketing, and excellent customer service. This is why the buzz-word "CRM" (Customer resource management) is one of the hottest things on the Web. From the perspective of the user, the better of a number of sites is the one that has these three things available in a way that easy for the user to work with. This is well reflected in a study headed up by Tara Scanlon in *Web Usability: A Designer's Guide* ([my review of this book](#)). In general, the study discovered that the least graphical of all of the sites in the study, was ranked the best by the users.

In reality, just like television isn't necessarily an effective advertising medium for all businesses, neither is the Net. As it's name implies, the World Wide Web is exactly that -- World Wide -- and therefore not necessarily the right medium for all. This is not to say that a local business cannot benefit from an increased local market share by using it, but they must do so carefully, without getting caught up in trying to get listed in all of the major search engines or other similar tactics as these will tend to benefit an international audience more than a local one.