

I would recommend Richard Smith to any business which is considering establishing, maintaining or improving a web presence for their business.

I have been in financial services since 1990 and an IFA for about 17+ years. Until 1997 my business was mainly protection and mortgage business and my production levels were at quite a low level.

Two things occurred in 2007 that had a devastating effect on me personally and potentially would affect my business going forward. The first was a diagnosis relating to my health and the prognosis was not good. The second, and its' degree I had not anticipated at the time, was the introduction of RDR on the financial community. That this was going to affect my business and other IFA businesses would be an understatement.

At that time I had to ask myself two questions:

1. Did I want to stay in this business; and
2. if I left what else could I do – after all, I had gone through periods where I often asked myself whether it was all worth the candle!

Fortunately, my health situation recovered and the decision I made was that I did want to stay in the business (at the time I was 60) but that the effect of the RDR on my business and IFA businesses in general would be so profound I would need to completely rethink what, and in which way, I needed to rebuild my business.

The long and the short of it was that I decided to move away from protection and mortgages and base my business process around investments and pensions. But to do that I needed a strategy and part of that was to develop a web presence. My prior view of websites had always been that basically, most IFA websites were all look-alike, 'me too-ism' efforts and that they represented little more than a glorified yellow pages. To a large extent little has changed in the interim 5 years as IFA's cling on to the remnants of what will inevitably be seen as 'the old way' and, for a large number of them, they will realise far too late that the world has changed around them and that financial services as we used to know it is history.

I don't think that I can ever remember such a sustained period of dynamic change occurring in any profession in my lifetime – financial services, technology and more to the point, the client/adviser relationship is going through a massive change where finally, and rightly, the client is in the driving seat. In the old days it was the providers who called the shots – **they determined** how much an adviser would get paid and on what basis and no matter how much we kidded ourselves that we were Independent, the truth, in hindsight, is that we were not. The providers needed to control their distribution channel and they did that via the mechanism of commission – any adviser who does not believe that should perhaps seek employment elsewhere.

So, I wanted a website that was more client-centric than just what effectively was the equivalent of an electronic sandwich board and to this end I appointed a web-designer to build a site for me (two in fact – one dealing with pensions and investments and the other a general site) and I have to say that it was a pretty site – in fact many people said so. And I got a reasonable number of leads from it that more than paid its original outlay.

However, the pace of change (especially for me because part of my strategy was to leave Sesame and become Directly Authorised, which I did in January 2011) was accelerating extremely rapidly. So rapidly in fact, that this, combined with my original decision to become fee based from January 2011 completely and my experience of discussing my advice process with clients to date, made me feel that I needed to change my website again – I had a few ideas of what I wanted but the question was

how? What I wanted was a website that was organic, gave me the opportunity to express my opinion in a way that I felt was appropriate to the changing nature of financial services in general and public opinion in particular.

In short I wanted a website that I didn't think anybody else has got – I wanted vibrancy and I was absolutely certain that the usual website designers couldn't deliver it, principally because they do not know how financial services, or the nature of how we advise our clients, work.

My previous experience of web designers was that they may be OK at putting the skeleton of the site together but when it came to content, to say that it was woeful would be a kindness.

If you don't believe me look at about 2 dozen IFA websites and you would think that most of them were built by the same designer but then when you look at the bottom of the site you find that they are different designers – perhaps you will see my point.

I have even seen sites recently, operated by well respected IFA's, where the sites have fundamental, needless basic errors – one I saw recently stated that the current allowance for a Stocks & Shares ISA was £10,200 – perhaps someone should kindly point out to them that we are in a new tax year!

Running parallel with the last few years I had begun to notice various articles, web articles, blogs, links etc., written by Richard Smith and had tucked this away in the back of my mind as worthy of future consideration in the event that I wanted to improve my web presence further.

So, in July this year, that is precisely what I did. I called Richard and had a long discussion about what I wanted and how I wanted it - and he told me how I could do it and how it would be better if I did it a different way.

Pragmatic, realistic, down to earth, no nonsense common sense.

I couldn't believe my luck! Here I was talking to someone who knew what he was talking about, could cut through the 'white noise' and also spoke my language and he understood exactly what I wanted.

So I commissioned his company to build a website for me that would enable me to deliver my message to clients and new clients alike in a direct way and which fits my overall strategy to take me through RDR and beyond.

But the service I experienced has gone beyond that – he looks at the overall situation with regard to web presence, paying attention to the potential of video (not to everyone's liking I know, but horses for courses), social media etc., and the general details of how to administer a site. I know that his range of services extends beyond website design and covers marketing (which I intend to leverage for another idea I have in the near future), giving seminars, provision of training etc., and it is tailored specifically in how to market your business as an IFA and how to develop a web presence. I also know that he provides a similar service to non IFA businesses.

I have met many IFA's recently who think that the hurdles of remaining in the business will be achieved once they have qualified and have embedded a fee based proposition in their business. And that once they are over that hurdle, then it is almost business as usual.

In my honest opinion, if that is what you believe, I think that you should consider a career move.

If an IFA thinks that the 'me too-ism' that has served them well enough in the past will also serve them well in the future then in my opinion they are suffering from some form of delusion.

It is perhaps an irony that the ones who will be in control of the process of the delivery of advice do not yet know it. The providers certainly won't be, as evidenced by their mad scramble for Platforms to deliver and protect their distribution channel – this in turn is likely to bring about a new order of Direct Sales Forces of some kind to fit some kind of 'Simplified Advice' process.

It will be the clients who will be in control of the advice process with the delivery by the IFA. For this to occur, the IFA will need the imperative of providing value to the process to be accepted by the client.

The client will select the IFA who can most effectively deliver what they want in the manner that **they want and at a price they are prepared to pay**. 'Me too-ism' doesn't cut it!

The opportunities open to IFA businesses are enormous and if you get it right you can build a solid, successful business. Get it wrong and it's oblivion.

And the only way forward is to use the web in the smartest way that you can and to leverage your brand to its maximum extent and to do that you need help. Accept that you are IFA's and not marketing professionals – and also accept that a lot of so called marketing professionals do not understand how financial services work.

You need to speak to someone who does understand what you are trying to do.

I can do no more than recommend that you speak to Richard.

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