The first employee people see

IMAGINE YOU HIRED an employee who, when asked about your inventory, could only tell people what you *used* to sell. Or when asked where an item could be found, could only inexplicably point to empty space or not answer at all.

Simply put, a single interaction with this employee might lead your customers to assume that you had absolutely no idea how to run your business.

Sadly, there's a good chance you've already got an agent like this as the first point of contact for many of your customers.

Of course, I'm talking about your website. Fortunately, I've got a few suggestions that will help you get your site working *with* you, rather than against you — a short list of best practices you can adopt and some things you'll want to avoid:

Best practices

Your website should accurately reflect who you are. A first-time visitor should be able to tell immediately who you are and the type of business you run.

If you're a retailer, your customers should feel welcome and confident that you'll be able to help them.

If you're a wholesaler, users should be made aware that you do not handle individual plant sales and your availability list should be readily accessible.

Keep it clean and professional. Today's audience can spot the difference between a professional website and an amateur one in an instant. Your site should be easy to navigate and search. Fonts should be consistent. Images should be optimized at the proper resolution and include alt-tags. When it comes to images of your merchandise and inventory, use a professional photographer or acquire high-quality images, which will have better longevity on the web and can be used for marketing pieces, as well.

Your website should accessible from any device. No matter which platform, browser, or device your customer is using, they should have the same, easy-to-use

experience. If you're not using live text for every part of your written content, it will be nearly impossible to have responsive content that is legible on mobile devices. Today, if you can't easily read your website from a laptop, tablet, or mobile phone, you're losing business.

Access to contact information must be present on every page. Customers and clients should never have to wonder how to reach you. You need to make it as easy as possible to find contact information, including a phone number.

Things to avoid

Websites that are out of date. If your website is clearly outdated, customers won't trust the information they see. There are many signs that a website is out of date. It may be a design that looks like it was created in Microsoft FrontPage 97. It could be dated imagery, content, or stale merchandise. It may be a banner that announces, "New for 2016."

Too much copy. As a rule, customers are coming to your website for information, but they're *not* coming to read at length. Information should be concise and easy to digest. Generally, there should be nothing more than a short paragraph for each section on a page.

Hi._

Shelly Weasel

Shelly Weasel is the web lead for Pivot Group, a Portland-based marketing and customer experience (CX) agency that helps clients engage their customers through research, marketing, and training.

Immature branding. Branding is a statement of who you are, and it's reflected in every choice you make on your website. It's the voice you speak with that lets customers feel they know you. Poorly written copy, taglines, and hand-drawn logos tell the customer you're not ready for the big time.

Random color palette. The color palette you use for your website is an important element of design and branding. It's not enough that you think it looks pretty — it must be consistent and relevant to the rest of the design of your website. Additionally, poor color choices can even affect the legibility of your site, making content nearly impossible to read.

Where the value is

In the long run, a well-designed, well-utilized website will be much less expensive than any traditional employee you can hire and will likely bring in more business. It's well worth the expense incurred to work closely with a professional developer to design the website that will work for you 24/7. Then plan on conducting thorough site maintenance at least once a year.

With just a little attention upfront, you'll have a reliable, hardworking employee that will be working for you for years. Where else can you find someone who will be out there year-round, 24 hours per day, digging up customers and keeping them informed, without overtime pay, sick days, or holiday pay? That's the kind of employee you really want to have! ☺