

Sonic Homes

www.sonichomes.com.au

June 2002

Sonic Homes is a domestic volume building company selling homes to a very broad market ranging from small holiday homes right through to large brick veneer executive homes.

The company constructs transportable homes in situations where distance or convenience suits and also offers extensions and renovation work.

Sonic Homes has been operating since 1987 servicing clients from the entire Gippsland area, extending to Mallacoota in the east and the outskirts of Melbourne's eastern suburbs. The business employs five staff and has its head office in Sale with three homes on display on the site.

We talked to Darren Haylock, consultant at the Head Office, Princes Highway, Sale.

Who are your customers?

Our customers are mainly people wanting to build a new house. We do not build commercial establishments. Our customer base is mostly made up of local people but we have had enquires from overseas via our Web site, including Canada and UK.

Do you have an established customer base?

Yes, we have some very happy customers and over the years have helped over 500 clients enjoy the pleasure of owning a new home.

Are you trying to attract new customers?

Yes, constantly. With the Government putting the \$10,000 grant in place it has become more affordable for first home-builders to get started. So we aim to meet their needs and assist them in this.

How will they benefit from your product/service?

Apart from the benefits of owning a new home, we have a range of standard plans with over sixty designs available. We also offer flexibility in our designs and can alter plans or build to a client's plan.

Who are your competitors?

Hotondo Homes in Sale and any other major builder in the area.

How have you been successful?

Even though we do concentrate on volume building, we pride ourselves on delivering an excellent standard of product with competitive pricing. In addition, we ensure a 'personalised service approach' as part of our business ethic. We are also easily accessible being located in a prominent position on the Princes Highway and have an established reputation.

How do you use digital technology in your business?

We use mobile telephones extensively. Each staff member has a CDMA mobile so they can be contacted anytime, especially after hours. Our office phone system is Commander with four lines.

The two office computers are networked off a server (Pentium II). We use Microsoft Windows including Excel, plus 'Databuild' as our industry specific software. It is an all in one accounting package and manages work from sourcing documents to costing (estimates) quoting, etc. Datacad is another industry specific software package we use to carry out drafting jobs on computer.

We are connected to the Internet via a modem. We are not on Broadband yet as we have not seen a need up to this point. But we are looking at it as a possibility for the future. Banking on-line for us involves checking our account balances, we don't fully use the facility at this stage.

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We use e-mail to accept enquires from customers and suppliers. We do not need an e-mail newsletter as we keep our site up to date with latest designs and photos of homes available.

There is a fax/photocopier machine at the office. We use scanners when we need to and our digital camera is mainly for pictures of model homes for the site. The office is also equipped with security system sensors.

Have you ever had problems with viruses?

Fortunately, we haven't had any problems

What measures do you take?

We use Norton Anti-Virus when we are alerted to any viruses circulating.

How often do you back up your files?

We insist on a daily back-up as we have important documents on file.

Do you have a Web site?

Yes

Do you have or are you connected to an Intranet?

No.

Do you use an Extranet?

No.

What is your Web site for?

To inform people about our company, promote our product and extend our business. It's to reach potential clients world-wide, and to get e-mail from any interested and potential customers.

Is this a development of your existing business or a new venture?

It was a development of the existing business.

If it is a development, how is it supposed to help?

The Web site represents our business. It gathers new information for our customer and product database from enquires from potential clients. They can contact us by e-mail, fax or phone.

Do you have an on-line audience?

From the feedback we get from our Web site administrators, I would say so. We receive a statistical report every 10 days from Messenger (Web site administrator) Messenger generates the reports which keep us in the picture about the activity our site attracts. The report goes into comprehensive detail and looks at such things as how many hits, how long the sessions are, which pages are visited, their e-mail address and which country they come from. So we know that people visit our site from all over the world and come from as far as South America, Canada, UK, Norway, etc. We consider most visitors to our site to be potential customers.

Do you host internally or externally?

Externally, on an ISP.

Do you make/allow transactions on your site?

No

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Do you collect information with forms/surveys?

Yes. From our 'let us help you' feature on the site, we can collect all sorts of information, especially in finding out "what sort of home are you looking for?"

How do you manage/update the content of your site?

One of our sales consultants is very good at managing the Web site. She communicates with our administrator – Messenger, a local firm – who update it as necessary.

How do you promote your site?

We have established hyperlinks with some of the real estate agents in the area, and we are also linked to the ninety-mile beach tourist Web site. Other than that we have our Web address listed on letterhead, business cards, brochures and street-signage.

How much does it cost to promote your site?

Our costs are minimal and come under our advertising budget.

Do you ask customers how to improve your site?

No

Do you have an existing customer database?

Yes.

Does your Web site capture new customer information?

Yes. The customers' e-mail contact details are captured electronically so that we can respond to their queries.

Does your site have a privacy policy?

Although it's not highlighted on the site, it is part of our company policy.

What is the best way to get people to come to your site?

We find that links and including the Web address in any promotion of our business has helped get people to visit our site.

What is the best way to get people to return to your site?

We have a 'specials' page offering special home packages that is regularly changed and it brings people back to our site.

What is the best way to get people to buy products and services?

A combination of good pricing, service, good designs and quality of product all work for us.

How does your site generate revenue?

From the sale of our homes. Although I'm not entirely sure if our site immediately affects sales figures, it is important in giving us the exposure we want.

How many versions/upgrades?

We are continually evolving. And the 'Specials' in home packages are changed on a regular basis.

Did you write a project plan before you started?

Yes. We had some discussions beforehand about what we wanted our site to do.

How much time did it take you to get up and running?

About 4-6 weeks.

Case study courtesy of Digital Business Insights Pty Ltd

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Where did you go for advice?

Messenger, a local Web site developer, gave us the basic framework and explained how to set up the site, especially in relation to putting information onto different pages.

How did you know whom to trust?

Referral from reliable local contacts. Also, the firm had an impressive client list.

Did you do the work yourself or use outside contractors?

We used outside contractors, locals who knew our business.

Were you happy with the work and help given?

Yes, they explained things very clearly to us and we are pleased with the outcome. It is an easy site to get around and presents the company in a professional light.

How much did it cost you?

It cost \$3,000 to set up.

What mistakes did you make that you wish you hadn't?

We are pleased to say that we didn't really make any major mistakes. We started out wanting to keep it simple, we had good advice from the Web developer as to what to do and what pitfalls to avoid – such as making the site too flashy and overly complicated with too much information. We did have some teething troubles in the beginning in capturing the e-mail details from visitors to the site but these were quickly ironed out with help from the developer.

What were the main risks you took?

We consider that there were no real risks in setting up the site. In fact we saw it as an opportunity for further growth of the business.

What advice would you give someone else?

Get professional advice before you start. In our situation, we didn't get too many alternative quotes for the work as we expected to pay the amount we did and we had budgeted for it. We were happy with the result and felt we got value for money.

What were the barriers to your digital project?

None really.

Did everyone in your business support the enterprise?

Yes. If anything, we felt we were slow in getting on board with having a Web site. In fact, we were one of the first in this geographical region to get our own site. Since our site has been in operation a few local businesses have contacted us for advice on how to start and where to go for help.

Do you know what technology is used in your company?

Yes. I like to keep up to date with technology. We have an IT expert on our Team who helps out a lot. I also source external advice when I need it.

Do you understand what it does?

Yes.

Where can people find useful advice about the subject?

Find respectable people who specialise in the field. Ask experts, do some research, speak to others who have done it before you.

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How did you decide which technology to use?

With our industry specific software- Databuild – the company that sells it came out to install it for us. We are continually upgrading our computer equipment to cope with large software packages because the design programs are all very big and require a lot of capacity. For that reason we have had to choose the maximum memory capacity we can so the computers can handle the workload.

Are the key managers up to speed with digital technology?

Yes, most of them have a reasonable handle on things. But with constant new developments they are always learning.

What are the business benefits you are hoping for?

Naturally we hope that our site will attract new customers resulting in more growth and sales.

Are any of these benefits quantifiable?

Certainly.

Are customers happy with what you have done for them?

Yes, we have had some positive comments on e-mails we receive from visitors to the site.

Are staff happy with what you have done?

Yes. They can refer to the site when speaking to clients and it helps in promotion of our business.

What is the most important thing you've learned in the last year?

You must keep your site current, eg changing photos regularly to keep it interesting.

Given what you know... would you do it again?

Definitely

What are you planning to do next?

We will be looking at going onto Broadband. Also we have been running Quickbooks as a program in tandem with Databuild. We are aiming to get everything moved over to operate just on Databuild. And we will be linking the office in Sale with an office in Traralgon, so that the two will work in tandem.