

Forums and Guestbooks - Are They Right For Your Website?

Are you wondering how adding a forum or guestbook to your website might help you attract and/or keep visitors?

Here are a few things you might want to think about.

Guestbooks

A guestbook is a place where visitors can leave comments about your site. Good hosting companies have part loaded Guestbook software which you can easily add to your account such as the Viper Guestbook.

Is a Guestbook right for your site?

If you are not attracting many visitors you cannot expect a guestbook to help you attract more. You may be able to get friends and family to leave nice comments about the site, but you may be disappointed that you don't get too many off the cuff comments from your site visitors.

If you are thinking about adding a Guestbook think carefully whether it is appropriate for your site. If your site is giving information about a hobby or a place, your visitors may wish to add their own remarks. We run a very successful Guestbook for a riding stables, where people like to share their experiences, or to make comments about the site (requesting more pictures for example).

We have also tried adding Guestbooks on other sites, but have found that a Guestbook will be less used if visitors are simply going to the site to find out information - the reason being that they do not yet have the experiences to share! Hobby sites are probably the most appropriate sites for Guestbooks.

Are there any cons to having a Guestbook?

Yes, there are. SPAMMERS! Spammers are the bane of all hard working webmasters. After your Guestbook has been live for a while you will find that it will get inundated by spam. This usually appears simply as a long list of websites totally unrelated to your site. Often this list includes links to porn or gambling sites, which may be totally inappropriate if your site is looked at by children.

The way to manage this is to use a Guestbook which enables you to vet all the new entries before they are posted. You may find, as we did for one of our sites, that this gets to be so arduous that you end up taking the Guestbook down. It is a real shame, but you have to weigh up the amount of extra time going through the entries is taking you against the number of bona fide and useful comments you are getting.

Although there is nothing to stop you adding a Guestbook as soon as you put your website live, you should not be disappointed if you do not get any visitors. Remember to put a link to the Guestbook on your pages reminding people to leave a comment in the Guestbook, as this will help let them know it is there. If you don't get bona fide comments, don't take it as an indication that people do not like your site. If you are offering travel information, for example, people may be too busy finding out all they can about a place they are thinking of visiting to take the time to add a comment.

Forums

Good web hosting companies allow you to use forum software for free (the popular phpBB2 discussion board which you can customise or SMF).

You will get people to visit and talk about things that interest them on a forum. The forum needs to be related to your site (otherwise it is difficult to sign post people to it), and the best forums are those that enable people to share experiences about hobbies. There are already hundreds of forums on the internet - you will need to find something which makes yours unique. Sometimes this is the luck of the draw - if you attract interesting members

(i.e. people who are knowledgeable and put over information in an interesting way) you will end up with a successful forum.

Forums do not develop overnight. They take time. Sometimes it is months before you get the first few members. But again, don't be disheartened. Expect it to take time, start off some interesting threads yourself, and wait to see what happens.

As with Guestbooks Forums attract spammers. There are ways of managing these, but this does take time and management. You can make sure you authorise each new registration to your site, but you need to review your emails everyday to make sure there is as little a time lag as possible between someone joining the forum and you granting them access. Wait too long and they will have forgotten and lost interest! You can alter the sign up scripts so that people cannot add a website address when they register. This is recommended - if people are only joining to advertise their own website they will not be genuine contributors to your forum.

Forums are a great way of letting others generate content for your website - a successful forum will grow into a community where people chat to, share information with and help each other. Search engines spider forums, and can help bring traffic to your site.

You will need to pay regular attention to your forum, as people can put on inappropriate entries. It often helps if you have a friend who will help moderate the site for you, as they may be able to go onto it to check the entries at times when you are not available.

The more successful your forum, the more work you will need to do!

So, are Guestbook and Forums right for you?

There is nothing to stop you trying a Forum or Guestbook on your website - but be prepared for these to take quite a while to get off the ground. There is nothing more disheartening than setting it all up and sitting back and then seeing nothing for possibly months (except for spam!).

But if you are prepared to wait you may very well be pleasantly surprised, and you may find that it works for you.

Consider carefully though the subject matter of your website, and think if you were visiting this sort of site would it make you want to leave a comment, or ask a question on a forum? If you are simply selling something the answer is probably 'no', as you will simply be going from site to site looking for the best deals. If you are giving information as well, however, you may find a forum useful to attract people to your site.

The final word

Forums and Guestbooks are fun, but they can be demanding and extra work, especially for the part time webmaster who already has more than enough to do. If you don't want to have the ongoing commitment, our advice is don't bother with these extras. The more successful they become, the more you will have to do!

Short note about the author

Pat Ransom has worked in the IT industry for 15 years and is experienced with local government and company websites. Having designed and published a successful and acclaimed website in her own right the secrets of website design and publishing are now shared at <http://www.webmasterproductions.co.uk>.

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