

At www.LorettasDanceBoutique.com, visitors can read about storeowner Loretta Dub's dance experience on the "About Us" page (left) and see what products the store offers (below).



Winning Websites

Create a website that draws dancers to your store. BY SUSAN JOHNSTON

When Loretta Dub, owner of Loretta's Dance Boutique in Keego Harbor, MI, created her store's first website in 2004, she discovered an unexpected benefit: "Fewer people called to ask questions like 'What are your hours?' 'Where are you located?' and 'What brands do you carry?'" she says. Dub could focus more on the customers who came in.

These days, many customers will visit your website before they come to the store. They want to know who you are, what type of apparel you carry and why they should shop at your store over another. Having an attractive, easy-to-navigate website can influence their choice. DRN talked to retailers and experts about how to create a website that will boost your store's foot traffic.

1. WHAT TO INCLUDE

Most potential customers decide within seconds of clicking on a website if they want to shop in the store. Your home page has to grab their attention. Offer an incentive, like an online coupon or promotion, says Stacey Marolf, founder of StudioofDance.com, a web design company for the dance industry. Keep in mind that if you post time-sensitive promotions, you must keep them up to date.

Still, this isn't always enough to get a customer into the store. According to James Chartrand, author and owner of the web design and copywriting company Men with Pens, viewers want to know what makes you different. You can

do that with an "About Us" page that gives your background. Are you a dancer? Why did you open your store? How much experience do you have with dance products? "Customers want to get a sense of who you are," Marolf adds. "People are putting more and more information on the web, so potential customers are accustomed to learning a lot about people."

Loretta Dub recommends that retailers' About Us page go beyond the basics. "Describe your specialty," she says. A customer who's looking for pointe shoes or hip-hop gear needs to know if they're in the right place. Dub's About Us page includes her dance experience and the type of dance apparel her store stocks. The copy reads: "As a full service boutique, Loretta's caters to dancers, skaters, ballroom & fitness enthusiasts and those who dare to be different with a beautiful variety of important dance and fashion wear." She also establishes her credentials—experience fitting dancers at a professional ballet academy and a member of the board of a pre-professional company—and posts a photo of herself on pointe.

When writing an About Us section, let your personality shine through. "Customers want to feel there is an actual person behind the site," says Marolf. Catherine Woodson and Marti Morgan, co-owners of Pointe Dance Boutique in Midlothian, VA, share their resumé on the store's About Us page, alongside a photo of Morgan as a child, dressed in a leotard, tights and tap shoes.

"Being part of the dance industry is like being in a club," says Marolf. "When a dancer feels she's communicating with one of her own, someone who has had similar experiences, she is more likely to buy from them."

Showing your involvement in the local dance community is another way to share your personality. Woodson includes a section on her website that lists local studios and dance



Pointe Dance Boutique's website provides directions along with a photo, so visitors know what the store looks like.

performances. “Our customers know we include information about studios’ shows, so they e-mail about upcoming performances and new studio openings,” she says. The storeowners update this information regularly.

A product page can also win over customers. Dancers want to know you carry their favorites. Divide the listed products into categories and subcategories, advises Chartrand. “There is nothing worse than a website with long lists of products or images,” he says. “Presenting less on a page has been proven to actually increase sales, because you guide people to exactly what they need.”

Most important, make sure your contact information is easy to find. Marolf suggests including this information at the bottom of each page or creating a separate tab. Both Dub and Woodson include their address and phone number in their navigation bar, so it is visible from every page.

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2. WHAT TO WRITE

Your word choice will help you stand out and get your site listed higher in search rankings.

Chartrand says you should focus your copy on the customer. “Talk to the visitor,” he says. “Eliminate ‘we’ and replace it with ‘you.’”

When it comes to style, avoid all caps (this can come off as if you’re yelling) or light colors that are hard to read. Using a lot of different fonts can also cause problems. “I recommend using no more than three fonts on a website,” says Marolf. “If you use too many, it can seem cluttered.” Stick with common fonts, such as Times New Roman and Arial, so they will show up on everyone’s browsers.

Large chunks of text are another turnoff. “Never write a paragraph that has more than three sentences; two is even better,” says Chartrand.

“When people read online, they skim and scan, so you need to break up text into short bits that they can read quickly.” Use bullets and subheads to break up larger sections.

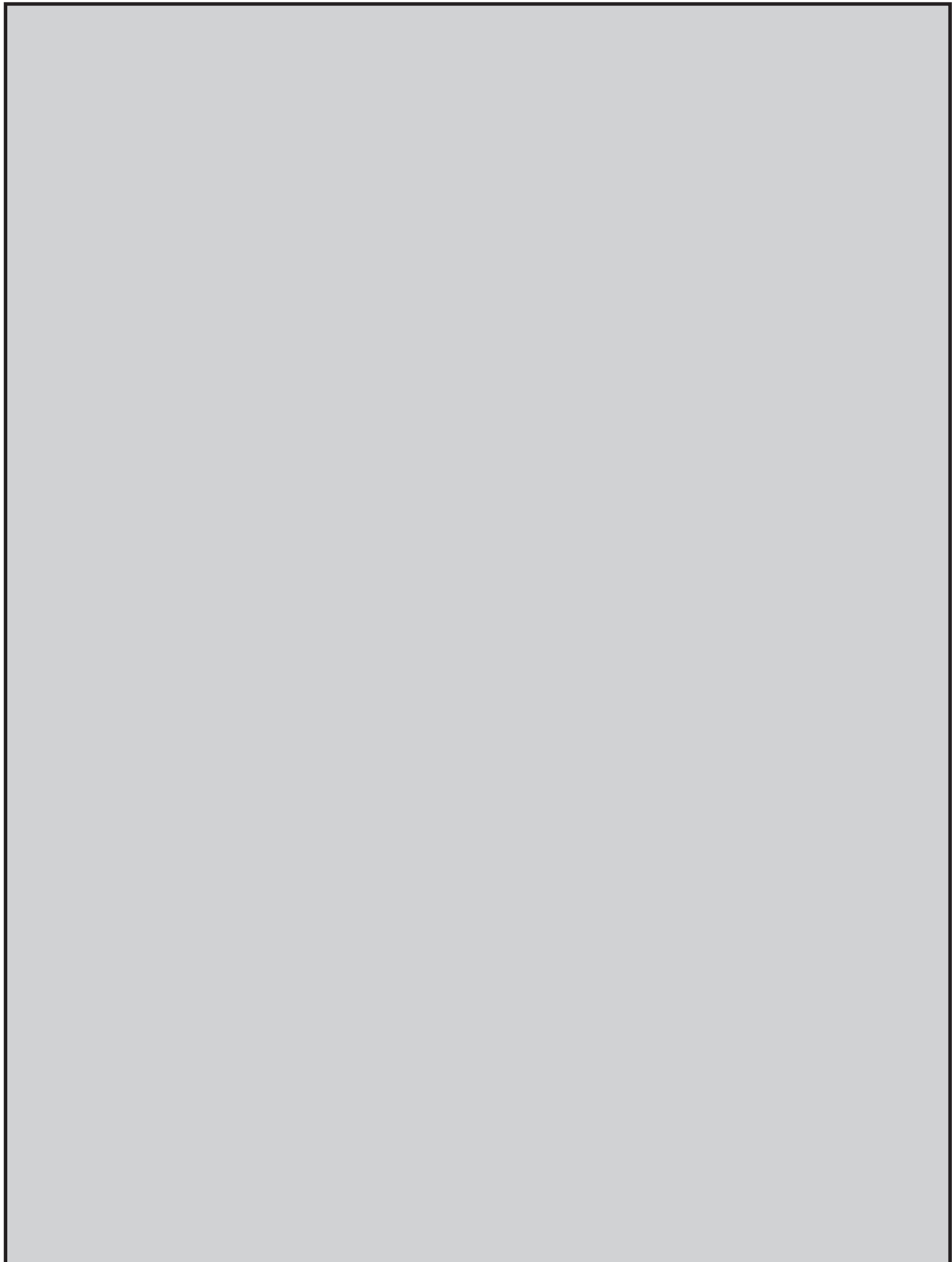
Make sure that the voice and style you use remains constant. “Don’t switch from sassy blog posts to overly stiff professional credentials,”

Chartrand says. Keep the overall tone casual but professional.

3. ADDING MULTIMEDIA

Photos and videos can help lure customers to your store, but only if they’re well-executed. Make sure that the photos show off the merchandise you have in stock.

Marolf recommends including people in your photos. “Instead of a picture of a leotard, have a



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How to Choose a Web Designer

Not everyone has the time or expertise to design their own website. Fortunately, there are plenty of professionals who can help. Here's how to find the right fit.

» **Review the designer's portfolio.**

"Ask for examples of the person's work and see if you like what he or she has done," says Chartrand. Have they designed websites for other dance retailers or creative businesses? If not, it could be tough to get the kind of website you want. Dub says the ideal web person is someone who can "blend creative and programming savvy."

» **Ask questions.**

When you ask about web hosting or domain names, the web designer should take the time to educate you. The person should also set up tools so that you don't have to call each time you need your site updated. "It's very important for the retailer to be proactive in making sure they can manage the website without that person's help," says Dub.


» **Talk to current customers.**

"Is the website designer open to you contacting a few current customers so they can share their experience with you?" Marolf asks.

picture of a young dancer in the leotard," she says. "A picture of a portable dance barre is much more effective with dancers doing tendus at it. It makes your visitors think, 'That's the experience I want to have.'"

To make your photos stand out, Jeff Castellano of Dance Web Design in Waldwick, NJ, suggests hiring a professional photographer. If that is out of your budget, then he recommends contacting manufacturers to see if they have product photos you can use. Whatever you do, avoid using photos from other websites without permission; this could create copyright issues.

Since customers like to see leotards or tap shoes in motion, some retailers go a step further and hire a professional videographer to create a short video showing their offerings. If you go this route, Castellano warns against having the video start automatically when you load the page. "If a video kicks in right off the bat, it may take longer to load the page," he says. "You should have to click on it to watch. A lot of sites also have a fancy Flash introduction, but that turns people off because it takes too long." And just like your copy, keep videos short—under two minutes—to hold viewers' interest.

Photos should give a sense of the store's atmosphere. "You don't want to bombard visitors with a ton of photos, but you want to have one or two that show off your store and the depth of your selection," says Marolf. This way, when customers show up, they know what to expect. 

Susan Johnston is a freelance business writer in Boston, MA. Her work has also appeared in The Boston Globe, The Christian Science Monitor and SELF.

Talk to Us!

Want advice on building a website? Ask your peers. Join in the discussion on the *Dance Retailer News* forum at <http://forums.dancemedia.com>.

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