The look and functionality of your site are the keys to successful online business. Here are a few pointers

Get it right

When it comes to setting up a site, many people get so bogged down with worrying about the technical aspects they don't give enough thought to exactly how they want the site to look or what they want it to do.

"The technical bit is what scares people, but this is actually the most straightforward," said Genesys Travel Technology Consultancy senior partner Paul Richer. "You need to have an eye for design and be able to choose a good set of graphics to make your website look good."

But, even before considering what the site is going to look like, you need an objective.

Do you want the site to be bookable, somewhere where users know they can go to order a brochure, or somewhere that provides more information to help the user choose the holiday they want, then pick up the phone and book with you?

Richer suggests agents write their own copy and choose their own photos.

"Make the site as 'human' as possible," he said. "Mention your name and put up pictures of your branch and your staff so visitors to the site feel they

are dealing with real people at the other end."

DOT New Media managing director Pete Warren suggests coming up with anecdotes and little nuggets of information that show users you have experienced the destinations yourself.

"People want reassurance, experience and advice that comes with talking to a real person – just because you're on the web, don't lose this personal touch," he said.

"The quality of images is important," he added. "You are selling dreams and people want to see something that corresponds to the images they have in mind."

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Once the website is up and running it's important not to forget it. Keep looking at your competitors' sites and keep striving to improve your own.

Holiday Extras, for example, is constantly looking at ways of making the booking process quicker and easier.

E-commerce co-ordinator David Stratton said: "For every page there is in the booking process, we lose 50% of our agents. The figure is higher when it comes to direct customers."

He added: "We're constantly looking at our site. It evolves all the time, but we avoid doing too much of a major change at once, as we want to keep the site as familiar to users as possible."

Tips for success

DOT New Media managing director Pete Warren gives his top 10 tips on setting up a successful site.

1. Identify your target market.

2. Design your site from the perspective of the customer. Ask yourself what they want and how your site can give it to them quickly and easily.

3. Make it easy to use.

4. Make it relevant and avoid gimmicks. Do not let your customers be distracted from what they came to the site to do.

5. Make your company stand out. Most travel sites are similar, so you need to think how you can use your website to differentiate your business from the competition.

6. Use the site to add value. For example, an online map of where you are located will save them calling up to ask you directions.

7. Update the site regularly with special offers and other information.

8. Make sure it works. Use a reliable website host and when you update, remember to update the links as well.

9. If you get enquiries through the site, make sure you answer them promptly.

10. Let people know your site is there by promoting your domain offline (on brochures, ticket wallets etc) and register your keywords.