



New Beginnings
DOULA
TRAINING

websites for **DOULAS**



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Regardless of where you live, setting up a website for your business is a fairly universal marketing/advertising tool that runs by the same rules pretty much anywhere.

Why would you want to set up a website?

When figuring out how you are going to promote your services as a doula, one of the most fundamental questions that you have to ask is: "How are people going to find me?" How is anyone going to know that you are a doula?

- Community Presentations (this is taught in the course)
- Word of Mouth Referrals (this comes with time and experience)
- Participate in related activities and organizations (talk with those that want to know about childbirth, volunteer)
- Newspaper ads/Telephone Listings/Paid Advertisements (don't waste your money here)
- Websites and Social Media Presence (this will be much more effective than paid advertising)

So while having an online presence is not the only tool in your bag for promoting your services as a doula, it is an integral part of the whole and if done right, is a fairly inexpensive return on your investment. You can also employ your website to improve the effectiveness of your other marketing efforts. Do not expect your website to do all the marketing for you. You must be willing to talk to others and present yourself and your services to others. However, many a client will come to your website first, before they reach out to contact you for services. Your website can also make it easier for client to contact you, providing online contact forms and links to other forms of contact.

So assuming you're looking for more information on building a website, let's take a look at some of the key factors for consideration.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

One of the first things to consider in how you want to approach the building of your website is to determine if the tool or service you are using will actually allow people to find your website. This is what is called "search engine friendly" or "search engine optimization" (SEO). The idea is that if a search engine can easily find what your website and determine what it is about, then your website will perform better in search engine results. The more detailed and relevant information about a given topic, the more information those search engines have to direct traffic to.

So how do search engines work? Basically, there are these little web robots that crawl all over the Internet. They originate from companies like Google, Microsoft, Yahoo, etc. Their job is to index the Internet, and process the available information in such a way that users of their services are presented with useful results. It is in their best interest to provide the most relevant, unbiased results. This is important because it gives a clear expectation of what we can do to present our services correctly.

Hence, there is no secret formula for how to make a website search engine friendly. It's not rocket science. In fact, the standard that I consistently use to determine if my website is search engine friendly is this: if a person with a disability visiting my website can find what they need to find, then so can a search engine robot (also called search bots/spiders/crawlers/etc.). Think of search robot as a person with a disability. When they come to your website they cannot visually "see" your website, but they can read it all. So if your website is set up in such a way that they can make sense of the information on the site up front, then they will know where to send visitors who search for what you have to offer.

Planning Your SEO Strategy

When planning a strategy around SEO, the first question that you have to ask yourself is: "What will people be searching for to find my website?" Chances are the word "doula" and their location will be near the top of the list. So for example, if someone in St. Louis is looking for a doula, chances are they'll begin with a phrase like "doula in St. Louis" or "St. Louis doula." If you build your website around that key search term, then you are more likely (it's never a guarantee) to be near the top of organic (unpaid, natural) search results for that key phrase.

This is probably one of your mostly likely sources for leads, especially if you live somewhere where there is not likely to be large concentration of doulas. You may even choose to identify yourself by a region, state (province), or other geographically defining name. But let's say you live in some place that has a slightly higher concentration of doulas (like Seattle, Washington, or Austin, Texas), you'll also want to consider other features of your service that will make you stand out. Do you specialize in lactation? or bereavement? Are these common terms that someone not familiar with birth would search for? Or would phrases such as "breast feeding support" instead of "lactation," or "loss at birth" instead of "bereavement" be more likely to be searched for?

So if I were to build my SEO plan around some key words, I might make prominent use of a phrase like this: "St. Louis Doula Offering Breast Feeding Support," as an example. Another example which might be even go a little further to reach out to women who have never even heard of a doula would be something like this: "New Beginnings Doula - Childbirth Support in the St. Louis Area Specializing in Breast Feeding." Now that gets to be a little wordy, but it's also very descriptive in general terms about what services you provide. Figuring out the key phrase that describes your business will then give you a direction in building your menus, how to focus your content, how to label your images, and greatly strengthen your website's ability to perform well when being indexed for search results.

Most of the important decisions that you will make to help improve the effectiveness of your website will be along the lines of improving Search Engine Optimization (SEO) which ultimately is improving the search-ability of the content on your website. The more informative and relevant the content on your website is, the more visitors and search engines will find it useful and engaging.

What's a Domain Name?

Now that we've got a good foundation in place in understanding the importance of Search Engine Optimization (SEO), we can move on to discuss various aspects of building a website.

One of the first decisions that you will make in setting up your website is selecting a domain name. The domain name is the unique identifier by which your website will be found on the Internet (e.g. trainingdoulas.com is our domain name). This is not your business name. This is not even the name of your website. However, it should be relevant to your services, easy to remember, and feature some key words that would help your website to perform better in search results.

Using our business website as an example, our company's business name is "New Beginnings Childbirth Services, LLC." This is an umbrella for the different services and products we offer. Our website focuses on the main service - doula training. When researching what was available for a domain name, we found that "doulatraining.com" was not available. So we flipped it around and tried "trainingdoulas.com" and that indeed was available and has served us well in explaining what we do.

Choosing a domain name focused on getting search engine results is only the first step in preparing your website. If you can't find the perfect website for SEO purposes, it's not the end of the game, so don't fret about it and move on. The actual content that you present on your website will ultimately be more important in landing SEO results. The domain name helps visitors know where to go to find the information they are looking for.

Hosting Your Website

After you've selected your website, the next step is to find a suitable web host. Your web host is the location of the remote computer server where your website will reside. I've written another article that discusses the different types of hosting environments. Hosting effects very little in regards to SEO performance, except when it comes to load times. A server that is too slow because it is overworked will render a lower SEO rank than a faster website when all other factors are the same. Hosting will be the one long-term recurring expense that you will incur for your website, so a balance between cost and performance should be considered.

Starting in September 2014, we started offering web hosting services for our students and alumni at a discounted price. I don't know how to promote this without sounding gimmicky, but we offer our same hosting environment to our students that we use to run our company websites at a steeply discounted rate. By so doing, we're more interested in getting our students set-up with a successful website that will help them promote their business. Please visit our web hosting for doulas page for more information or contact us directly.

Page Titles, URL Links, and Image Tags

After considering domain name and a hosting environment for your website, let's take a moment to look at some of the actual nuts and bolts of websites that help to improve SEO performance.

Page Titles

The name is perhaps a little misleading as page titles don't actually appear within the visible web page at all, but are usually found as a label in the browser tab at the top of the web browsing window. This descriptive tag used to identify the page is an important label to not overlook even though it is not visible on the web page itself. Make sure every page title is unique, chocked full of juicy descriptive words.

Often times, websites will ignore this or place just the bare minimum in the page title areas. Some poor examples of this are when you see just the basic name of the website on every page, or worse yet, the website domain name is found in the page title area, which often times is the browser's default behavior when no other information is provided by the website itself.

A better solution to for web pages is to put a descriptive name of the web page in the page title tag. These can be as long as needed, don't worry about them getting cut off in the browser tab. Also place the specific page information before the site title when given the option to do so.

Examples of this from our own website:

- Home Page: "Online Doula Training and Certification Program"

A Word on Design

Once you get people to your website, the next step is keep them there long enough to become acquainted with you as a doula and want to reach out to you to contact them. Potential clients should be able to find the information that they are looking for easily and quickly. How your website presents that information both structurally and visually will be important to the effectiveness of your website.

With regards to design, keep it simple and clean. Nothing is more distracting than an over-crowded or disorganized website. Avoid bells and whistles (I'm talking about the fades, the slides, or anything designed to increase the "wow" factor of your website). They are not needed to communicate your message and they can break, or worse yet, slow down a website. They do nothing to communicate what kind of services you provide, and distract for giving your clients the information that they want. A simple design, that loads quickly will be much more effective and respectful to the end users' experience.

Blogging

Blogging goes a long way in both establishing yourself as experienced in your field and also helping to improve search-related traffic to come to your site. Perhaps it's not always the most relevant or most local folks that are reading your blog. However, when someone does go searching for a doula in your neighborhood, chances are better that you'll be higher on the list if you have fresh, recent content on your website, as well as some history behind you. Blogging does that for a website.

Taking it a step further, blogging also allows you to communicate with your potential clients long before they make first contact. Perhaps it's your philosophy on life, the way that you look at the world around you that will sell your services, when being compared with the competition. Each one of us is unique and blogging also allows for us to express that unique voice on to your website.

The key to blogging is consistency. Always be blogging. Don't think you have much time? There's no hard line requirement on how often you blog, maybe you only blog once a week, maybe only once every two or three weeks. Maybe once a month. The key is to be consistent with whatever amount of time you can post updates. It is better to only blog once a month, and to blog every month, than to blog for three days in a row, and then go six months before making another few updates. Figure out your schedule and make it work as best you can. Naturally, the more blogging you are able to do the better. But don't stress it if you can't blog every day, or even every week. Just be consistent.

Need inspiration about what to write on your blog? Write about your experiences as a doula. Share your thoughts about birth. Like-minded clients will read what you are saying and find in you someone that they can trust even before they make the first contact.

Contact

Don't make it hard or difficult for you to be contacted online. The reason you have a website is, after all, so people can contact you. Provide your phone number, and at least a city and state/province info on the contact page. This too will help search engines to know what areas you service. Do you service multiple locations or geographical regions? List them on your contact page. You might also make your contact information (phone number and location) readily available in an obvious spot on the home page. Make it as easy as possible for people to find your contact information.

I'm kind of up in the air on whether or not to post your email address. We feature our email addresses on our contact page, but in a format that is not easily scraped from the website but a spam bot (web-based robots looking for email addresses to send spam to). For example, we post our email address in the following format: name{at}our-domain[dot]com. Notice the different brackets being used. This doesn't look like an email address for a robot, so they don't pay attention to it. Also, never link your contact email to another page, or worse yet, a "mailto:" link.

The preferred method of allowing for contacts online is through the use of a contact form. This allows users to send you email messages straight from your website, without them having to know your email address. Some sites employ extra steps to prevent spam bots from sending fake emails. These are ok, however make sure that your contact form does, in fact, work for you. You don't want to make it hard

for your clients to reach you, and if they have to jump through loops just to send you a simple message, chances are they won't.

Social Media

Much like blogging, social media can help to establish you a reputable resource for birth-related information. Do you have social presence for just your doula service, or do you make your own personal profile your doula presence as well? My preference is to separate the two, but if it is who you are, then you'll do just fine to combine the two into one. Just remember *to not make your personal profile private* if you want to use it for marketing your doula services.

Whatever, your active social media sites are, be sure to have links to them from your website. Social media properly used increases your social currency, or in other words, the validity of your service, because of the longevity of your social profile. While anyone can create a website and post anything they want on that website, social media requires the proof of a community and history to give validity to your claims as a doula. If your social media profile is linked to other like-minded individuals, it will be come increasingly obvious that you are in fact who you say you are.

Using WordPress for Your Website

I am a strong advocate of building your website using the WordPress platform. The entire TrainingDoulas.com website is built on the WordPress platform, with some notable customization, especially in the student area. Running your website using WordPress and a small selection of the right plugins, makes getting your website up and running a fairly straight forward process.

You may need to spend a little money to find just the right theme (design - look and feel) for your site, but you will inevitably save a large amount of time and money getting your website to look professional, clean, and well-polished. A good theme should run you between \$0 - \$40. Avoid frameworks, as they are a great deal more bloated in the code department with the idea that they provide you with more control over your design. Find a design that you like, don't try to design it yourself.

When it comes to selecting the right plugins for your website, be sure to consider the following: Akismet, Contact Form 7, and WP Super Cache (once you're ready to go live). Here's what these select plug-ins will add to your site. If you plan to allow commenting on your website, Akismet will keep the spammy comments out. It doesn't catch everything, but you'll be grateful that you're not spending your time wading through spam comments. Contact Form 7 is exactly what you would expect, it allows a safe way for you to create custom contact forms for your website without exposing your email address to spammers or other malicious users.

Finally, if you want to improve the speed of your website WP Super Cache will do the trick. Its caching engine will save a copy of your website's generated files, effectively decreasing load time and also saving on processing resources. The faster your page loads, the more professional it will appear to your

visitors. Remember though, don't activate WP Super Cache until you are all done making changes and updates to your website. When you do make changes you can "clear your cache" to see the site updates on the front end of the site.

WordPress is extremely flexible. Should you need to, WordPress allows you to change out your website presentation without effecting the actual content (text) of your website. It's not as easy as flipping a switch most of the time. Usually a little planning for a few hour of downtime should be expected. Widgets and menus typically have to be replaced and updated. We did this when upgrading to our current design. However, we were able to keep our original content and blog posts, while updating to a fresh new look and feel.