4 Easy-to-Use Tools for Building Websites

Get your business online in a flash using these simple services.

Creating a website once meant writing a big check to a design firm. Now there are plenty of Web-based tools that promise to make it easy for anyone to build a professional site, no coding or design skills necessary. We tested four of them to see how they compare in terms of usability, features, and the finished product. Here are the results, ranked with stars (one star=good; four stars=great).

Sidengo *
We created a site in 20 minutes using Sidengo. After choosing a font and a background photo, we added a logo, slogan, and links to four sections. Our final site looked professional but basic. For instance, when you click on a section, the content pops up on the right-hand side of the homepage, not on a separate page. That's not the only drawback: Sidengo offers only a dozen templates, and you have to go to a third-party site to register your domain. On the upside, Sidengo can replicate your site on Facebook. The service plans to add basic e-commerce functions this fall.

Cost: Free for a basic site, then starting at $10 a month for Google Analytics integration and a custom URL that does not include *Sidengo* in the name

Jimdo **
Jimdo lets you create a site with a variety of features, including photo galleries and videos. It took an hour to create a seven-page site. We browsed through 120 templates and chose one, then added text and photos, as well as a shopping cart. Next, we registered a domain on Jimdo.com, which handles hosting. As with the other tools we tested, Jimdo also lets you optimize your site for mobile devices. Our verdict? The finished site was easy to create and more substantial than the one we built with Sidengo but still a bit too simple.

Cost: Free for a basic site with ads, then starting at $90 a year for a site with a custom URL, analytics, and no ads

Joomla ***
Unlike the other tools here, Joomla works with third-party applications. To choose a template, for instance, we visited the RocketTheme site, where we paid $40 for a layout. We registered the site on GoDaddy.com. Then, we added text and photos to the layout on the Joomla interface. Next, you can choose from some 10,000 features, including more than 100 e-commerce functions. We liked having so many options, but it took two days to get the hang of Joomla and another day to build a seven-page site. In the end, our finished product looked much more polished than the ones we created with Sidengo and Jimdo.

Cost: Joomla is free, but you will pay for some third-party features.

Weebly ****
Our top pick, Weebly was easier to use than Joomla, but the result was just as impressive. We picked a template from about 150 choices and added photos and text using drag-and-drop tools. You can also add a full e-commerce portal, photo galleries, and slide shows, and register your domain right on Weebly.com. Our seven-page site, which looked sleek and professional, was up and running in 30 minutes. Our only complaint? Creating a custom URL on Weebly was a bit confusing.

Cost: Free for a basic site, then starting at $3 a month for a custom URL and advanced features, including a video player and analytics