

Making the Most of the Web:

Promoting Your Private Voice Studio Online

BY CATHERINE K. BROWN

In a struggling economy, maximizing every opportunity for finding voice students is critical for teachers. One teacher shares how she used the Web to start and build a successful studio in less than a year.

My decision to open a private voice studio in the midst of a recession was more circumstantial than strategic. I had always dreamed of sharing my passion for singing as a teacher, but I had never felt ready to abandon the stability of my public relations career. Then in June 2009, I learned that my employer would be eliminating my position within a few months. The pending layoff gave me the perfect opportunity to change direction. With the clock ticking, I began applying my communications skills to the task of recruiting students. Today, a year after I began teaching, I have a thriving voice studio of 35 singers.

Why the Web?

Numerous factors contribute to the success or failure of a small business. In the case of my voice studio, online marketing and communication played a pivotal role, enabling me to grow my business quickly with limited resources. In my first year as a private voice teacher, nearly 80 percent of my students have found me online, while the remaining 20 percent have found me through referrals,

personal contact, and traditional print marketing.

I believe that in this economy, even established teachers with much higher referral rates could benefit from stronger online marketing. Whether students first encounter you online or Google your name after hearing it from a friend, a solid Web presence gives you credibility as a teacher. It allows you to shape what others know about you. And, in a field where anyone can set up shop as a voice teacher, the Web enables you to advertise your credentials and share your thoughts on singing. Further, a well managed online presence gives prospective students the opportunity to get comfortable with you as a teacher, singer, and person before they make their initial contact.

Managing Your Web Presence

I recommend viewing online marketing in terms of managing your presence on the Web. Your goal should be to ensure, first, that you are “findable” and, second, that the information available about you online reflects what you want potential voice students to know. Here are some ideas to get you started.

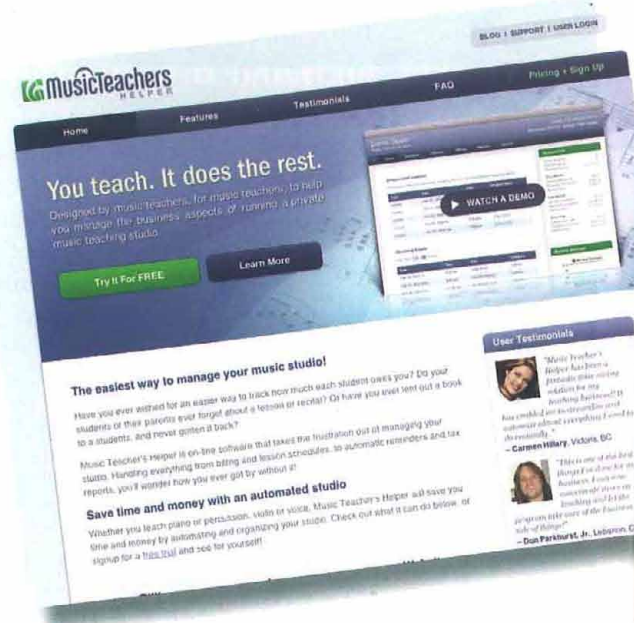
Create a Studio Website

If you don’t already have a website for your voice studio, consider creating one. If you are also an active performer, I recommend having a separate website—or a separate section of your site—that presents you as a voice teacher. While students are generally glad to have a teacher who performs, they want to know that he or she is equally committed to teaching.

Today there are more ways than ever to create a stylish, simple, low-cost website without knowing HTML. MusicTeachersHelper.com allows teachers to create a studio website for free, and other free or inexpensive options include Yola.com, Wordpress.com, Weebly.com, Wix.com, and DevHub.com. For my own site, I use SquareSpace.com, a paid service that offers highly customizable templates.

Be “Findable” Online

Simply having a website doesn’t make you “findable” online. There are two ways that you want to be able to be found. First, make sure that someone who Googles your name can come up with quality information about you. Whether they’ve heard your name from a neighbor or met you at a party, they should be able to type your name into a search engine and find out more about you as a voice teacher. Second, you want to ensure that



when someone in your area is online looking for a voice teacher, they find you.

To test your “findability,” type your name into Google and see what comes up. (If your name is as common as mine, try using your middle initial or also entering your city and state or words like “singer”, “voice”, “teacher”, or “soprano”.) Next, Google “voice teacher” and your city and state. In both instances, your name should appear on the first or second page of results. If it doesn’t, here are a few ideas to improve your ranking:

- **Build links.** Search engines prefer sites with strong connections across the Web. Look for opportunities to link to other sites, and request links from sites with content that would appeal to your readers. Research the term “link building” for more information and ideas.

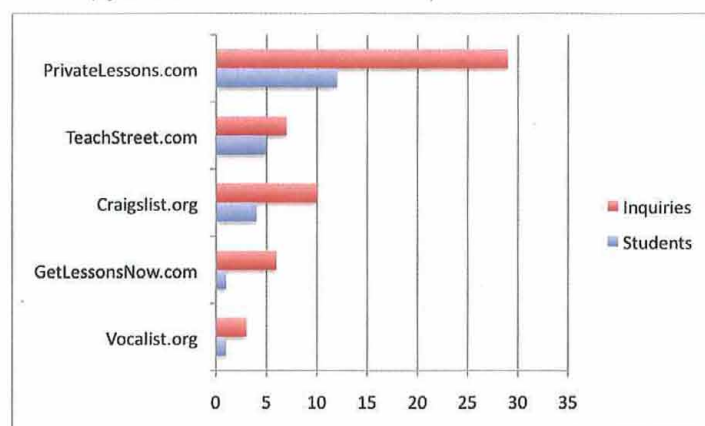
- **List yourself.** One great way for voice teachers to build links is by creating listings on third-party sites. Some listings are free: Craigslist.org, Vocalist.org, and NATS.org (free for members). Others (including TeachStreet.com and GetLessonsNow.com) charge annual or monthly fees. I have had success on many of these sites, but my most lucrative listing is on PrivateLessons.com (see Figure 1). The site has brought me 12 students, making it well worth the \$99 annual fee.

- **Optimize keywords.** Identify keywords that potential voice students will enter into search engines and find ways to build those words into your site’s content. Read up on Search Engine Optimization (SEO) techniques or hire a knowledgeable college student to help you out. According to Google, “singing lessons” is entered into the search engine about 246,000 times per month. Similar popular searches include “voice lessons” (135,000 monthly searches), “vocal lessons” (60,500), “voice lesson” and “vocal coach” (49,500 each), and “singing lesson” and “vocal training” (33,000 each). As these examples show, you can enhance your “findability” simply by varying how you describe what you do.

- **Advertise online.** If your search rankings are low, consider purchasing online ads through Google AdWords. The ads are simple to set up, and you pay only when someone clicks your ad. You can set your ads to show up when people search for certain keywords, and you can even target specific zip codes.

- **Be social.** Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, MySpace, YouTube, and other social media platforms can help you get the word out that you are a voice teacher looking for students. Keep your social media contacts informed of your activities as a teacher and singer. If you’re planning a studio recital, invite people to attend. If you’ve redecorated your studio, update your Facebook status with photos. These basic actions can help keep you and your work fresh in people’s minds. (Please note that if you have previously used networking sites only for personal purposes, you may need to remove content that could be considered unprofessional before using the sites to promote your business.)

Figure 1. My listings on these websites have brought me new students (figures date from June 2009 to June 2010).



- **Start a blog.** Search engines love blogs (especially if the content is updated regularly), and blogging can quickly boost your search results. Also, there is a lot of misinformation online about singing, and a blog can help you establish a reputation as an authority on the voice.

- **Track your results.** Programs like Google Analytics show you how people are finding your website. Before you begin trying to boost your search results, set up a tracking system so you can monitor your progress.

Recommended Reading

The two books listed below include excellent ideas on marketing a private music studio. They focus mostly on traditional methods, however, rather than online marketing.

- *Making Music and Enriching Lives: A Guide for All Music Teachers*, by Bonnie Blanchard
- *The Private Music Instruction Manual: A Guide for the Independent Music Educator*, by Rebecca Osborn

The following websites are wonderful resources for anyone interested in learning more about online marketing and social media.

- MarketingProfs.com—Information on marketing, with emphasis on new media
- SocialMediaToday.com—Information on social media trends
- ProBlogger.net—Information for anyone who wants to start or grow a blog
- HubSpot.com—Resources for Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Staying Safe

I sometimes hear voice teachers say that they are wary of marketing themselves online. Common concerns include fear for physical safety and privacy or anxiety about e-mail scams. Following are some safety guidelines for online marketing:

- **Never list your home address.** It's fine to list your town and state or even your neighborhood, but if you teach from home, never list your full address online.
- **Speak to potential students on the phone.** Hearing someone's voice tells you a lot about the person, and anyone who refuses to speak with you is not seriously interested in lessons.
- **Watch their language.** Beware of vague inquiries, and look out for language that indicates that a student doesn't understand the purpose of voice lessons. Serious students should be able to describe what they want and why they want it.
- **Think local.** Don't be flattered by e-mails from people who say they would like to travel from abroad to study with you. Unless you truly have an international reputation as a teacher, treat such e-mails as spam.
- **Never provide personal identity information.** No student needs your social security number or bank account information, so don't give them out!
- **Trust your instincts.** If a student's inquiry makes you uneasy for any reason, simply ignore it. Responding could

confirm to a scammer that your e-mail address or phone number is active.

Reconsidering the Web

You've heard it before, and it's truer than ever: the Internet is changing the way we communicate. Five to 10 years ago, a website could have been considered an extravagant and unnecessary marketing expense for a private voice teacher. Yet today, not having your own website is almost as good as informing the world that you're closed for business. Further, having a sloppy or poorly managed Web presence can label you as old fashioned, out of touch or, worse, unprofessional.

In a struggling economy, many voice teachers need to rework their marketing strategies. Marketing your studio online may sound intimidating and expensive, but it doesn't have to be. Anyone can learn the basics through online research and trial-

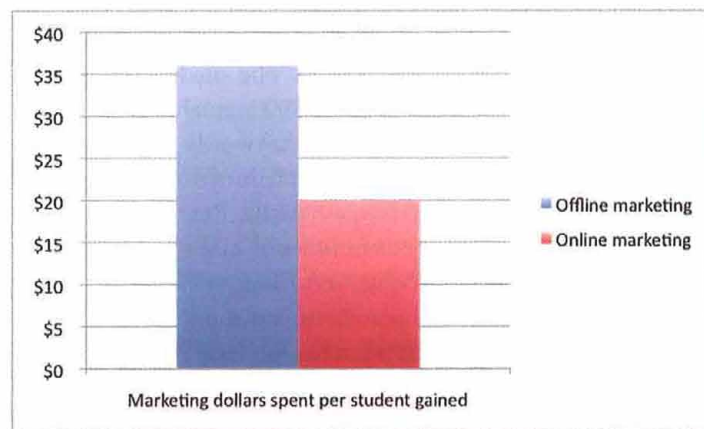


Figure 2. I have experienced a much higher return on investment with online marketing than with offline marketing (figures date from June 2009 to June 2010).

and-error. Additionally, Internet marketing is more targeted and, therefore, more affordable than print (see Figure 2).

I often wonder if Google and Facebook have overtaken the "word of mouth" advertising that has sustained so many private music studios. Instead of personally asking others for a reference, we just Google it or message friends on Facebook. If the Internet is the new "word of mouth," don't get left out of the conversation. Start spreading the word!

Catherine K. Brown is a private voice teacher and freelance communications consultant in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Before opening her private voice studio in 2009, she worked in public relations for seven years, holding positions at the Academy of Vocal Arts and the Philadelphia Orchestra. She holds a BA in music and German from St. Olaf College and has taught English and music in Germany on a Fulbright grant. She writes about singing at www.findingmysingingvoice.com. CS