

PLANNING YOUR WEBSITE

In too many cases organizations develop a web site for the wrong reasons:

Their MD wants one

- A web design firm has offered to give them a special deal
- They don't want to be 'left behind'
- They want to provide an electronic version of the organization's brochure

But really good reasons such as

- Making money via sales and customer development
- Saving money by cost effective distribution of newsletters and other publications, managing collaboration and best practice
- Providing information via searchable databases
- Changing attitudes to your organization



are constantly emerging.

Effective web development requires careful thought and deliberation. The opportunities are so vast that they usually stretch the imagination and require rethinking not only of the initial conception of a web site (almost always the electronic brochure) but in some cases a revisit of the organization's whole strategic plan as well.

But also consider whether you really need a website at all? Not everybody does. Can you explain clearly and briefly why you need a website, and what it will do for you?

A good web plan will pose challenging questions about an organization, its administrative operations, the way it delivers services to its customers and even how it defines customers.

There is no convenient 'microwave meal' approach to planning a website that will meet its objectives and we can't begin to touch on all the relevant issues here. However, the following website planning guidelines should help you to create a web site that delivers real value – and a site can be successful and deliver real value only when it has been carefully thought through.

Website planning consists of seven main areas:

1. Setting the web site's goals
2. Defining the web site's audience

3. Creating the web site's structure
4. Planning the web site's content
5. Generating the web site's navigation plan
6. Developing the web site's visual design
7. Generating the web site's development plan

Setting the web site's goals



Ask yourself about what you hope to accomplish with your target audience.

Write down your goals so that you remember them as you go through the process. Make goals both quantitative and qualitative.

You should be able to summarize your project in a single sentence. If you can't do that, then you probably need to spend some time focusing your thoughts.

Defining the web site's audience

To define your audience think expansively. Who are they?

- Customers or members?
- Potential customers or members?
- Colleagues and staff?
- Competitors?
- Who are you not reaching now?
- Do they have computers?
- Are they online?
- Do they actively use the web?
- Etc. etc. etc

Design your web site "outside in" and not "inside out" – that is design it from the perspective of your audience(s) and not your organization. It's often helpful to think of your site as being divided into several sub-sites

Your website has to provide information that fulfils the immediate needs of your site visitors. Capturing their eyeballs requires you to understand their point of view.

- What information will they be looking for?
- What resources will attract their eye?
- What will motivate them to click through different sections of your site?

Your goal may be to get visitors to contact you, but the immediate needs of visitors' are probably to answer questions like:

- Can I trust them?
- Are they any good at what they do?
- Will they do what I want?

Before the website begins to sell to its site visitors, it has to answer their questions and put their fears to rest. This is fundamentally important, so one more time:

Creating the web site's structure

Once you have worked out what your site visitors' immediate needs you need to create path(s) that your site's visitors will follow. Draw a flow chart to show how you want users to navigate through the content; it should be as simple as possible and focus on the user's experience -- how he or she can navigate through the content.

The flow should address their concerns and needs and gradually take them towards completing your goal.

To create the flow you need to:

1. Identify the different groups of people who'll use your website
2. Work out what you want each of these groups to achieve on your website Identify the information they need
3. Work out the 'best' flows to help them find and read that information



Planning the web site's content

Make an outline of all the content that you plan to include – an exhaustive, detailed list of all the media necessary for the project. Make sure you account for factors such as copyright.

Evaluate the administrative implications of each content piece. Whatever you do, don't wait until your site is launched to start thinking about how you will manage it.

Good websites like beautiful gardens require attention:

- Adding new content

- Updating and revising old content
- Evaluating usage
- Responding to information requests and feedback

Think about the right balance between static information (easier to maintain but doesn't generate repeat traffic) vs. dynamic information (serves as a "carrot" but can add an administrative burden).

Get a handle on the technology challenges and cost factors. Identify special features such as audio or video streaming, web-based conferencing, electronic slideshows, online searchable databases, Geographic Information Services (GIS) mapping, heavy graphics or animations. Here you will need expert advice on the implications for cost, user capacity to handle advanced applications, loading times, and management requirements. Always plan for future growth, even if you can't afford advanced features at the outset, they can be phased in over time.

Once you know what your content is think about its organization. Computers are logical beasts. Your website will proceed more smoothly if you have a logical document structure and file hierarchy. Decide where to put items such as images and sound files. For example, it's convenient to place all your images in one location, so that when you want to insert an image into a page, you know where to find it. Any time you have more than one document relating to a particular topic, you should probably consider creating a folder to contain them.

Generating the web site's navigation plan

Think about the experience you want your visitors to have. Think about how a visitor to your site will be able to move from one area to another. Navigation should be consistent throughout your site. If you place a navigation bar across the top of your home page, try to keep it there for the entire site.

Consider the following points:



- One-click navigation to any page (or section in a very large site)
- Visitors should know where they are in your site
- Search features and indexes make it easier for visitors to find information
- Feedback features provide a way for visitors to contact the Webmaster

Understand the unique way that people navigate the web – remember that people "read" the web in a way that is completely different from the way they read print media. According to Jacob Nielsen, a guru of web usability, most people don't read web pages at all, they scan them. Neilson suggests using highlighted keywords, sub-headings, bulleted lists and one idea per paragraph and simple graphics.

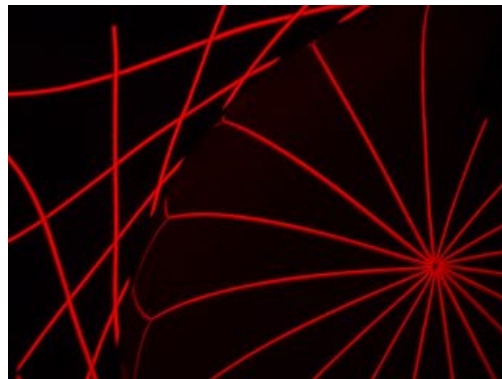
Developing the web site's visual design

Know what you want before designing the site. Ask around. Look at lots of sites. Bookmark a list of favourites as models. Make a commitment to control the web design process. Don't delegate decision making to outside consultants.

Draw sketches. It's a good idea to sketch out what you think the layout of your pages should be. Don't worry about being very precise. Just get the general idea down on paper as a reference. In more detail you can create 'wireframes' and 'explosions'. (Non functional, annotated sketches of key elements and screens with detailed insets of particular areas of detail).

Maintaining consistency in your page layout and design helps to ensure a good user experience. The user should be able to click through the pages in your site without getting confused. If all the pages have a different look, or the navigation is in a different place on each page, it might frustrate the user. Make sure your site provides a consistent look for your user.

Understand that design for the web is different from design for print. Visitors have different computer systems, different browser software, and different screen resolutions. If a designer insists on visitors seeing the site exactly as he or she sees it this can create a lot of disadvantages (e.g. slow page loading) and/or a lack of flexibility. The whole principle of the Web is that users can choose how they want a page displayed. If you try to stop them from doing that, you'll be closing the door to a lot of potential visitors.



Once the website design has been created, it's time to test it. This is the most important usability test that needs to be done and the one that will save you the most time and money in the long run. According to IBM, every £1 invested in making your website easy-to-use returns £10 to £1009.

If you don't do any usability testing you may discover that the structure of the website doesn't make sense once the website's up and running. This can and has happened and it leaves you with two choices: redesign the website or make a new website - neither are attractive options.

The most common objections to doing usability testing are:

- It's too expensive
- It'll take too much time
- I don't know how to do it

Wrong, wrong, wrong! Usability testing, especially at this early stage, is incredibly cheap, quick, informal and easy to do. You just need to show five people the plan/site map of the website and ask them:

1. What's the point of this website?
2. If you were on this page, where you would click?
3. And where after that?
4. Is it what you need?

That's it! As long as these five people roughly fit into your user profile everything should be fine. It's been shown that using five people for a usability test will uncover 85% of the usability issues of the website.

Generating the web site's development plan

Now write down a detailed plan to spell out how the above will be delivered, who does what and when. Include schedule and budget information. There is plenty of project management software to help with this or just write it.