

Factsheet: How to create a winning website



Overview

Whether you're thinking about building your first website or upgrading an existing one, creating a good quality website that looks professional and achieves its objectives doesn't have to be costly or complicated.

Despite the surge of design-heavy sites launched in the late 90s - complete with needless Flash imagery, incomprehensible navigation and unusable tools - it is the simple, clean and text-based websites that are proving the most effective.

This factsheet gives an overview of the planning involved in creating a website and the factors you should consider in its structure, content and design.

What's your website for?

If you are building a website for the first time, think about why you want one and what you want it to achieve for your business. If you are upgrading your existing website, identify areas that need improving or any new content or services you could add.

You may want to use your website to:

- Promote your products and services
- Provide your customers with news and information
- Sell products or services
- Launch a new product line
- Promote a special offer or sale
- Capture customer information (e.g. email addresses)
- Build a community of users
- Reduce costs (e.g. less paperwork, online customer service)

Setting objectives

Once you have outlined the main reasons for having a website, start to set clearly defined objectives that you will be able to measure and evaluate. Your objectives should be realistic and specific - such as increasing sales of a certain product by 3% within the first year; or getting 5,000 visitors to your website each month within the first six months.

Assess your budget

Of course, budget will be a factor when developing your website. This isn't just the initial outlay for planning, build and design work but also the ongoing maintenance costs (both technical and editorial).

Prioritise

If you think that you can't afford to do everything you want to, make a list of priorities and identify the areas that you think are most important. For example, if you can't afford to develop an online payment facility, you can still promote your products by featuring price lists, product descriptions and delivery schedules.

DIY or outsource?

You need to decide whether to build the website yourself or hire a website design agency. This will largely depend on the complexity of your site and the budget you have available.

Do-it-yourself

If finances are tight, it is still possible to produce a good quality website yourself, using one of the off-the-shelf software packages, such as Macromedia's Dreamweaver or Microsoft's Front Page. These have templates that can be customised to fit in with your company branding and design preferences. If you have a working knowledge of HTML, you can also easily edit your website from a code level.

Outsource

If your website is going to comprise more than a simple shop window, then it might be a good idea to enlist the services of a web design agency. An agency can provide you with a complete service, from helping you to plan the structure and navigation, to producing design samples based on your brief. They are also experienced in understanding the way people use the internet and can help you to build a user-friendly site.

An agency can either manage the website on your behalf, or provide you with the ability to update the site yourself. If you are going to have a large number of regularly updated pages, then the best option will probably be a database driven site which you update through a content management system.

Website structure and navigation

The main aim of website navigation is to help users find information quickly and easily and to encourage them to stay on your website. When planning the structure:

Organise pages

Once you've identified your content, group it into subjects or themes such as product lines or content areas. Organise these into pages and draw a diagram of the structure of the website and how the pages link together. Where possible, allow your website visitors to get to content within two clicks of the homepage. An example could be: home page >> women's shoes >> women's evening shoes

Make your menu bar clear

A clear navigation or menu bar gives users an instant overview of what's on your website. Menus are usually situated at the sides or top of the page as that is naturally where our eye goes. Unless your website has very limited content, don't link to every page from your main navigation as it will just be too overwhelming. Instead include links to the main content areas of the website which, in turn, can link to sub-sections.

To make users aware that there are sub-sections, either display them permanently under their headings, or have them drop down as a menu when users roll their mouse over the main headings. Title the sections clearly, so users know what to expect from them.

Add a search function and website map

If you can, include a search function on your website as users often go to this first. Or, if you've got a limited amount of content, include a website map or index detailing the content structure and pages.

Include a breadcrumb trail

Displayed as links above the content, a breadcrumb trail shows the user can see where they are on the site and how they got there. They can then use the breadcrumb trail to click back to the previous sections they have visited. Another way to stop them from getting lost is to include a link back to "home" on every page.

Be consistent

While each page needn't be identical, try and keep your navigation system consistent throughout the website by putting the menu bar and links in the same place on each page. This will help users become familiar with the lay-out of the website and encourage them to work their way around it.

Link pages together

Users don't always come to your website via the homepage as they may find a page through a link or search engine. Therefore it's important that pages on your site are linked to one another in order to ease navigation. You can do this through linking to related content via text or graphical links, and by making sure each page has a menu bar. When naming links avoid the outdated "click here" command and instead title the links with relevant words, or calls to action such as "buy now". A good linking structure also helps the search engines read and index pages.

Avoid using frames

Many websites use frames because they allow the menu bar to be constantly displayed on the screen. However, you risk alienating users as some browsers can't read them while search engines have problems indexing them.

Design

Once you've structured your website, you need to decide on its look and feel. You want your website to look clean and professional while conveying your company's brand values. If you are going to hire a web agency, give them examples of your marketing materials to help them achieve the right look.

Keep it simple

The first rule in website design is to keep it simple, as messy and complicated websites are guaranteed to put off users. This is particularly important when designing your homepage as it's usually the first place users arrive. It should be clean and free of clutter, so limit the number of images, links and different content areas it has. While you want to keep it simple, ensure it features your company logo, a strap line summing up what your website offers, a menu bar linking to other sections such as About Us and Contact Us and a search function.

Choosing colours and fonts

If possible, keep your website colours consistent with your company branding. Be careful when using coloured text on a coloured background as certain combinations - such as red on blue - can be difficult to read. With the main areas of text, it's best to stick with black (or dark grey) on white. Experiment with different fonts and choose one that suits the style of your website design and is easy to read. Verdana and Arial are popular choices whereas Times New Roman tends to look outdated.

Keep images small

Use images sparingly as they will add to download times, making it very frustrating for users. If you do want pictures, keep them small. As a general rule of thumb, a web page should not be more than 20kb including all images.

Avoid flash

Flash is used to create animation, sound and interactivity. However, due to its file size it can be painfully slow for pages to download - particularly for those on 56k modems - while some browsers can't even read Flash. Also, search engines don't index Flash pages, so your website won't be featured in their listings. If you want to use Flash, make sure you also provide a HTML version of your website.

Don't have a splash page

A splash page is used to welcome visitors before they enter a website, with an image and a "click here" or "enter" button. Still widely used, splash pages can be off-putting as they add an extra barrier to visitors trying to get into your website.

Display your content clearly

Make sure the content is clearly displayed so that it is easy to read. Try not to overload the page with text – limiting it to around 250 words – and separate it into easy to read paragraphs. If you have a lot of text include quick links to different sections so users don't have to scroll down the page. Make sure your captions and headings are catchy and check all copy for typos and spelling mistakes.

Pre-launch checklist

Even if you have outsourced your website development to an agency, it is still worth running through the following checks before launching your site:

- Do a final check of all web pages on your site, making sure that the content is correct and that all links work
- View the site at various resolutions to make sure it is still readable and clear
- Check that your site displays correctly on the main browsers (i.e. Internet Explorer and Netscape)
- Check the page download time at different connection speeds
- View the site without graphics (by turning them off in your browser)
- Test the payment facility from start to end, if applicable
- Check that all forms work and that the enquiry emails are sent to the right person
- Ensure that you comply with all relevant legal requirements (i.e. the E-commerce Directive, the Privacy Directive and Data Protection laws)

Domain registration and hosting

Two other decisions are choosing an address for your website and deciding on which company you'll "host" your website with. There are many companies offering such services so it's advisable to shop around for the most suitable deal.

Registering your domain

Your website address – known as your domain – is your company's identity on the internet. It's normal practice to register your company name with a .co.uk or .com ending (or both). However, you could also choose a name that describes the services you offer or products you sell, such as "antiqueclocks.co.uk". You'll find a range of domain name registration companies on the internet.

Web hosting

Once your website is ready you will need to "host" it on a server so that people will be able to access it. Most Internet Service Providers (ISPs) will provide you with space on their servers, with the cost of hosting packages ranging from free to £20.00 a month.

Maintaining your website

Once your website is up and running it's important to keep it up to date and in good working order. Maintenance includes:

Refreshing content

Make sure the content on your website is up to date, such as product prices or details of your company. Also, give regular visitors something new to see when they visit and keep the website alive with new promotions or news.

Check your links

Make regular checks that your website links work and aren't broken. You can do this manually or use automated software. If you accept online payments, check that this process works properly.

Respond to feedback

Give someone the responsibility to respond to any feedback from customers. Keep a record of the kind of feedback you receive as this will tell you what people think of your website and what people expect from you.

Measure your website traffic

Use software that checks your log files, to see how many people are visiting your website and which pages are most popular. Use this information to identify the areas of your website that are doing well and which are doing badly.

Summary

The key to creating a winning website is to ensure that you always have your target audience in mind. You are never going to please everyone, but you have a better chance of pleasing the majority if you keep to the rules of simple and clean design along with functional and user-friendly tools and features.

Further information

Your website strategy

<http://www.businesslink4london.com/advice/resources.cfm?typeID=5&tax1=11&tax2=0&resourceID=254>

How to accept online payments

<http://www.businesslink4london.com/advice/resources.cfm?typeID=5&tax1=11&tax2=51&resourceID=651>

Internet Service Providers (ISPs)

<http://www.businesslink4london.com/advice/resources.cfm?typeID=5&tax1=11&tax2=51&resourceID=171>