



THE ANATOMY OF A WEBSITE

A Web Design Primer by Hooman Moayyed

What Primarily Makes A New Or Existing Web Site Successful is the time spent in preparation for your project. Much like building or renovating a new house, a web design project requires specific blue prints and plans. The better your plans, the smoother the project will move forward. Good plans also equate to better job cost-control. Detailed plans will generally avoid overlooking tasks that may result in being costly. The following are some ten general guidelines that will better help you understand this process and what is expected of you and your web designer.

Content is King

One of the biggest mistakes people make is underestimating the importance of content within a web site. Content refers to the verbiage that is needed for every page of the web site. When generating content, consider two things: Quantity and Quality. The quantity of content is important because much like what you are reading now, people look for information when browsing web sites. If you bombard them with products and services and offer too little information, the visitor may be turned off by an overly commercial approach. Even if you only sell products and that is the only goal you have, you may sell more if you educate your visitors about ways that can use them and other products that are complementary to them. People also may refer their friends to your site because you have taken the time to educate them about something. This places you in a more authoritative light about your product and trade.

Another motivation in offering more content within a web site is to rank higher within search engines. Engines such as Google are striving to refine their search algorithms to display more relevant content when someone does a search for a subject. Imagine that you did a search on Google for “history of baseball” and all you got were sites trying to sell you something or sites that had nothing to do with baseball at all. You would quickly look to another search engine to find better results. Consequently, it is becoming more difficult to rank higher in the engines unless you offer some type of informative content that goes beyond just selling something.

Finally, the quality of your content dictates how long your visitor will make use of your site. If the web site is riddled with spelling and grammatical errors or if it does not read well, you may lose your visitor's attention. The average site visitor will stay at your site for five minutes. How much longer they stay is up to you. Therefore, we highly recommend that you involve a copywriter from the beginning. Any good design firm will offer such services. Since you understand your business best, it is usually very effective to write the first draft yourself and then have a copywriter proof it and add some creative flare to the verbiage.

Most importantly, content creation is a stage in web development that is often the cause of delay within a project. The site owners are usually very busy and cannot attend to content development, which consequently can delay a project indefinitely. Spend a little more on content creation - it will dramatically pay off in the future.

Web design is *not* like print design

Remember that what works on printed matter does not always work well on the web. Printed matter uses dyes and a preset size of paper. Every element within the piece can be controlled to result in an exact product. Designing for the web is completely the opposite. One has less control in the end result of a web site because it will be viewed by people using computers with varying monitor resolutions, video color settings, operating systems, browser versions and connection speeds.

What may look one way on one monitor may look completely different on another. For example, most computer systems are shipped with the video card set to 800x600 resolution and 16-bit color. This means that your computer desktop will fairly small in size and colors will look close to real. If this machine was equipped with Internet Explorer version 6 running on Windows 2000, the web site would look almost exactly as the designer expected it to look. However, if someone else viewed the same site at 640x480 resolution, 256 colors running on Netscape 4.5, it may look like the web designer had lost his mind. On average most designers optimize the web site to run at 800x600 monitor resolution and 256 colors (web safe colors). A good designer will also optimize the site to run on 90% of the web browsers in use today.

So when you work with your designer, don't get frustrated if you can't use your special corporate font or if the placement and shades of color aren't just perfect. Designing for the web constantly requires compromise and a good designer will know how to work the compromises in your favor.

Here are some rules of thumb when designing a site. These rules help to maximize browse time thus resulting in higher site utilization.

- *Make good use of white space. Use white space for areas heavy in text.
The easiest reading is in black and white.*
- *Try to use light background colors and dark text colors.
However, avoid using colors that clash such as orange and brown.*
- *Keep buttons down to a minimum.
Generally, more than six or seven buttons on your main navigation is too much.
You can always offer a set of sub pages under a main heading.*
- *Try to use web safe colors in your navigation.
Your designer can give you a palette of colors that will surely work well on all computers.*

Define a goal for the site

Often times, a web design project will stray in so many directions that its purpose in the end becomes diluted. A web site must have a pre-defined goal behind it. Generally, web sites will either save the owner money or make money for the company. By streamlining the operations of a company, a web site can save money. For example, if customers are constantly calling for brochures and catalogs and order products by calling an operator, why not allow them to browse and purchase products online? Another method would be to allow outside salespersons to download and fill our forms online rather than fax them requiring duplicate entry. Always think of how technology can work in your favor thus streamlining operational overhead.

A well thought out goal may also include positioning the site to generate revenue. This can be accomplished through an online store, promotional email campaigns, search engine optimization and traditional advertising.

Understand your customer

Design the site with your customer in mind. This requires you to define the demographic of your market. A demographic definition usually consists of the sex, average age, occupation and median income of your ideal customer. The way you design a site for children will dramatically differ from one designed for the elderly so knowing whom you will target is an important consideration in the design process.

Don't forget about traditional advertising

Unless you are operating a value-add or intranet site, traditional advertising shouldn't be overlooked. Don't expect the site to generate revenue on its own. This is equivalent to opening the doors of a new business and expecting business to flood in. Such misconceptions were created during the dot-com boom where everyone seemed to be making money hand over fist when in reality most of the large operations were operating at a loss and predominantly financed by venture capital and IPOs. Traditional advertising is an effective way of announcing your site and driving traffic to it. This may include business cards, post cards, billboards, letters and flyers. Also allow a budget for online advertising that may include direct email marketing and search engine optimization. Online advertising is usually much cheaper than traditional advertising so if you can't afford the traditional route, at least consider this one. Without an ad budget, your site may not perform to your expectations.

Everyone wants something for nothing

As cynical as this may sound, people are enticed by offers. Buy one get one free or anything with free in it gets people's attention. Discounts, incentives and offers are calls to attention. They motivate people to do something. In your case, you want them to buy so no matter how gorgeous a site you have, nothing helps to sell like a special offer. Do them often and definitely do one whenever launching a new site. Such offers can also motivate people to use your new web based technology such as when FedEx offered online shipping. By offering a 10% discount for shipping online, FedEx further succeeded in their goal of streamlining their backend operations by increasing online utilization.

Create a lead capturing strategy

Imagine that over 1 million people visit your site every day. Sounds great doesn't it? Well, it really doesn't matter if those visitors ultimately leave without a trace. If you don't sell anything at all, it's important to at least get their contact information so that you have a faint chance of selling something to them later. The bare minimum you should get is an email address, however, people are very sensitive about giving this information out due to the amount of Spam people get. Avoid making future communications with your customers' costs of ads and offers. You will quickly create enemies and have them opt out of your list. Try to offer them relevant information that somehow helps them. Newsletters and how-to articles usually accomplish this quite well. Here are also some lead capturing methods and important things to consider:

- Leads from sales. Your customers are the best people to target future promotions and offers to. Ironically, they are often overlooked. When you gain a new customer, try to retain them by communicating with them in the future.
- Leads from premium content. What's in it for me? This is what a potential new lead will think before giving out their email address. Premium content is defined by information that is unavailable from the public links if a web site. In other words, by giving out their email address, they will gain information that they could not have accessed from the public web site. Once they give you this information, send them premium content on a regular basis. With that content, build in an offer.
- Leads from the formation of a community. Communities are very effective in gaining new prospects and retaining customers. Special groups, hobbyists, etc. often give out their information because they trust that it will not be abused and that they will gain insightful information about their interest or hobby.
- Disclosing your privacy policy. If you are generating leads and send mass emails to them, always prominently place a link to your privacy policy, generally at the bottom of each page. A privacy policy tells the visitors what you will and will not do with their personal information. It may say that you will keep their information in a database and will not offer or sell it to third parties. It may also state that you have the right to email them if they purchase products or gain premium content. It can also state that they may opt out of your list and how they can accomplish this. Never use a cookie cutter privacy policy. If you do and violate it, you can be sued in court and lose.
- NEVER Spam. If your privacy policy states that you can email people who have requested premium content and those who have purchased products from you, make sure there is a very easy way to opt out, or request removal from you list. Some people become very agitated if they feel that you email was unsolicited. Often times, people forget they had any dealings with you and mistake you for a spammer. By stating in your email "You have received this email because you have opted to be on our list and we never Spam..." and offering a link for removal at the bottom, you will avoid making enemies. The worst thing you can do is email people by buying mass email lists or using spidering technology to acquire email addresses. Spamming is not tolerated by most ISPs and can result in site deactivation. Opt-in lists exist which consist of people who have requested to be part of a list about a certain subject or interest. Purchasing opt-in lists is technically not spamming but often people still become infuriated by any commercially oriented email.

Consider how to convert prospects into customers

So you have a good lead capturing strategy in place and have a considerable list built. Hopefully you are generating revenue. The process of turning a prospect into a customer is called conversion. In order to calculate your conversion ratio, divide the total number of unique site visits into the total number of sales. The closer to 1 your ratio is, the more successful your site becomes. At first, you begin at 0. The goal is to increase this number by implementing a conversion strategy. Here are some ways to help boost your conversion ratio.

- Make links to conversion easily accessible. A link that leads someone to purchase should be in plain view and on as many pages as possible.
- Create calls to action. Calls to action can consist of sales, specials or promotions that allow the visitor to click through to conversion. This means that they become a customer by virtue of taking advantage of a special offer you promote.
- Create a breadcrumb trail. A breadcrumb trail is a predefined path that you anticipate a visitor will take which ultimately leads to conversion. You may post headline that leads to an article which links to an offer to purchase the product being reviewed.
- Create product feeds to major search engines. A product feed is a conduit between your e-commerce system and the search engine. This conduit sends mass amounts of information about your products to the search engines. This allows someone who searches for a particular product by name to link directly to the details page of the product within your shopping cart. From there, the visitor can purchase the product.
- Segment your market. If you can segment your customers and prospects into particular “buckets” or segments, you can target them with products you know they may not have and need. For example, if you divide your customers into Group 1, the customers who bought widget “A” who could use widget “B” and Group 2, the customers with widget “B” but need widget “C,” you are able to target Group 1 with an offer to purchase widget “B” and Group 2 with a separate offer to purchase widget “C” and “A.” By knowing what your customers have, you can target them with things they need.

Track the performance of your site

Web statistical analysis software comes with just about every hosting package available. Some examples are Webalyzer, Wusage, Web Trends, LiveStats and so on. Not all web stat software is created equal. One type of software will analyze different from another. Every web site has a log of every visit and click made to your site. The log includes the date of visit, time, browser version, operating system, page visited, where they were referred from, etc. The way they work is that they download this log file and analyze the mountain of information into a graphical, easy to comprehend report. The difference in the software is how it compiles and analyses the data and also how easy the report is to understand. Packages such as LiveStats actually provide you with real-time reports of site activity for enterprises that need to know what is happening at any given moment. This is particularly helpful when tracking time critical promotions and email marketing campaigns. Pay particular attention to the number of unique site visits. When you visit a web site the first time, this is counted as a unique visit. Once you hit a site, you may click on 20 different pages before you leave the site. Technically, you have generated 21 hits within the site's log file. If you multiply 10,000 visits by an average of 20 hits per visit, the total number is 200,000! This number is very deceptive and many companies boast of their high numbers of hits but in reality this means nothing. If you had 200,000 unique visits, then you have something to brag about. As for the rest of the information in the report, take the time to read the help files, which describe to you what the package's terminology means. When you find a package you like, make sure to check the log reports often. The ISP usually sets when the logs generate. On average, they generate once per night or once per week. However, you may be able to set the number or have your ISP set it. Many ISP refuse to generate reports more frequently than once per day as it is very taxing to the servers they run on.

Remember to announce your web site once completed

Hopefully you already have some type of list of prospects, friends or customers in your email address book. Once your site is completed and live, make sure to announce the recent launch of your site and welcome opinions about the new site. Hopefully, you'll create a little bit of viral marketing where your friends tell two friends about your site and they tell two friends and so on and so on...

Hooman Moayyed is founder and CEO of Interweb New Media, Inc. Hooman holds an MBA from Southern Methodist University in Dallas and a B.S. in Radio/TV/Film from the University of Texas at Austin. He has been consulting for firms such as Ericsson and Nortel since 1996.