



Improve Your Website – Seven Steps

Introduction

The website is often the first introduction a potential customer will have to your company. In a split second the client can form an opinion not just of the website, but of your organisation, its products and the services offered.

This paper looks at seven issues that need to be considered when designing or re-designing a website to ensure your visitors give you the thumbs up.

1 Accessibility

We live in the digital information age and as companies we ask our customers to 'see our website for further information'. But in many cases the website is difficult to use and this is especially true if the customer has some form of disability.

The website visitor's disability may be sight related where the user simply needs to increase the font size to make the text readable. And all of the browsers have a function or option that allows the text font to be increased or decreased in size. With Microsoft Internet Explorer the user selects *View* followed by *Text Size* and can choose the required option; Medium, Large, Larger. But with a poorly designed website this action does nothing and so the user will not be able to read the text. Not the right start when trying to build a successful business relationship.

The vast majority of websites contain pictures, which have been included to show something and presumably something that enhances the topic ie the picture is there for a reason. Blind people also access the Internet and as Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web says: 'The power of the web is in its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect'. Blind people often use screen readers; programs that read aloud the text on the web page. These accessibility aids cannot interpret a picture, which is seen purely as a mass of pixels, but the screen reader will translated the text contained in the <alt text> field; the field used to describe the contents of the picture – providing the field has not been left blank by the website designer.

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) has developed accessibility guidelines that if followed will enable the web site to be accessible to all individuals, including those with a disability. Entering meaningful text into the <alt text> field associated with an image is one of the recommendations. Also following the guidelines when designing a website has the additional benefit of improving accessibility for every user. In addition the site will comply with requirements of the government and the European Union, who have introduced recommendations and in some cases legislation to prevent the modern information age equivalent of physical exclusion - 'digital exclusion'.

Today no one would design or construct a building that excludes people who are living with disabilities. But many websites still practise 'digital exclusion' by preventing the disabled from having full access to the website and the information that it contains.

2 Colour

As soon as the website loads the customer will form an opinion. This opinion will not be based on the text; the visitor will not have read the text, or the pictures; they will not be looked at in any detail either, the immediate impression and initial opinion will be based on the website colours.



Colours affect our subconscious; there is an automatic reaction that cannot be controlled. The black and yellow of the wasp evoke fear and concern; these same colours are used for danger signs and to indicate when a liquid is poisonous. Colours invoke emotions and can produce a positive or negative reaction.

The psychology of colour and our reactions to colour are not new and have been used in advertising for years. Companies spend millions working on marketing campaigns to influence their customers, produce the required reaction and to present the required image; Red invokes danger and leadership, Green says nature and harmony, Blue is solid and trustworthy etc.

Choose the website colour scheme with care; the right choice will mean you are half way towards creating the desired response in your visitor, your future customer.

3 Use CSS (Cascading Style Sheets)

The finished website does not exist, it is always work-in-progress, there will always be more information to add, pages to change, new pages to be included. The result of this process is all too evident on many websites. The site is unstructured and seems to have been built on an ad-hoc or piece-by-piece basis by different people using a variety of different standards, fonts and layouts. The website looks as if it has been 'cobbled' together. And that's because it has been cobbled together - built by different people with no common standards and added to page-by-page, mixing content and data with formatting commands.

CSS separates the content, text, graphics etc from the formatting and enables a common style and consistency to be applied to all of the site pages. Headings are consistent; Bold, Italic, Verdana, text will have the same font and size; Ariel, Medium, and all of the site links will look and act in the same way; Verdana, Bold, Blue, Underlined, or whatever standard is adopted.

The consistency gained from CSS together with improved usability of the site can be combined with other marketing materials helps to build a corporate image and brand.

4 No Frames, No Tables

As with all computing technologies, those used to develop and display websites have changed and improved over time. Many earlier websites used 'frames', as part of their development tool portfolio, to position items and objects on the screen. Other developers used (and continue to use) tables as position holders, mainly because tables are quick, easily learnt and understood.

However both of these techniques present problems with accessibility and are less flexible than more modern techniques using DIV elements together with the CSS 'Float' and 'Clear' properties. Using these CSS based techniques also forces more logic and structure into the design, to create websites that are future proof and W3C compliant.

Tables still have a place in website design, but only to do what they were originally designed to do: display tabular data.

5 Images

Pictures, images and diagrams are often important parts of a website. Where would a travel site be without some pictures showing the locality or places of interest? And the fall in the cost of digital cameras means that anyone can now include images on their site. There are a number of different image formats that can be used on a website but primarily two are pre-eminent: jpeg and gif. Other formats include bmp and png.



But adding a couple of pictures to a website can create problems. If the images are too large, they will take a long time to load and rather than keep people on the site, long downloads will drive people away. For example a 750k bitmap can be replaced by a 20k jpeg or gif without any loss of quality and will load 40 times faster.

Many of the pictures produced by modern digital cameras are of excellent quality, with the accompanying large file size, but for the website the highest level of quality is not needed – page loading speed is more important. If you wish to make high quality images available this can be done via a separate download option.

6 Content

The site is ready, it is colour coordinated with some nice pictures and it has been coded with CSS to control the layout. These are all of the ‘hygiene’ factors for the website, if they are good or even acceptable then visitors will not be driven away from the site.

Keeping visitors on the site, or making them return requires some substance, something of interest, and that something is content. On the web as with other forms of the media - content is king. No amount of Flash animation, dynamic menus or JavaScript screen effects will keep visitors interested for long.

To be successful a website still needs good all fashioned copy; well written and amusing features, articles with up-to-date facts and figures, pieces with useful information and practical advice.

And website copy is different from newspaper copy, whereas a newspaper article may run to 3,000 words, the equivalent website article may need to achieve the same impact in 500 words. Many companies use their technical people to produce copy for the website. These employees are invariably well educated and experts in their field, but this does not mean they can produce easy-to-read informative copy for a website.

7 Analytics

Marketing campaigns should always be monitored. For a mail shot the measure is returns per thousand. Display advertising in the technical press generates responses that can be related back to the circulation of the magazine. Website analytics enable the company to understand how the site is being accessed; directly or via a search engine, how long the visitors stay and which pages receive the most hits. Most analytics will also show the geographical location of the visitors, if the majority of your visitors are from Australia it may be interesting but of no use to the business if the company operate solely in UK. But at least if you know this is the case, then some action can be taken, maybe you can appoint an Australian agent or distributor.

Summary

The company website is now a key marketing tool and in many cases a company will be judged by the quality of its website. Getting the site wrong is easy but with some thought and attention to detail the company website can become a productive and profitable marketing channel.

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