

Planning a Perfect Website

Part One: Defining a Need

5 years ago it seemed like every company in the world was jumping on the Internet bandwagon, setting up a website of some kind— any kind! Everyone was doing it, so you must need a website too.

But, now the honeymoon has ended. The website that your 12 year old nephew constructed for you 6 years ago may not be all it was cracked up to be. Web surfers of today have different expectations and less patience than they used to. They want their MTV, their EBAY and their E-mail all pouring down at high speed. People are hungry for live information that is current. Not last years tired old company mission statement and product list. How does your company fit in with today's New Web technologies? Is your business profiting from the web? Are your customers and employees using the Internet to save you time and money? If you answered no then it may be time to look at what the Internet of today can offer you.

Many new websites are now being developed with "Self administration tools". This means that rather than having to request a webmaster to do updates and changes to your site, you can now use a simple "Content Management System" (CMS) to add, edit and delete, content, images, documents and products for your website. By having these tools readily available to you or your staff, you can make updates faster and more frequently which makes your site more dynamic and exciting to web visitors.

Understanding what these and other new tools can do is the most important aspect of beginning your new website. In the past many websites have focused purely on attracting new clients or selling products over the web. Although this idea has had success with many companies, I would challenge you to look at how online technology can help in other ways. Things like communication, automation and organization between your existing customers and/or employees is a much underrated use of the Internet for small to medium sized companies.

For an example: If you owned a local sun tanning company, you could use the Internet in two different ways.

#1. Build a website in order to attract new clients to your local retail outlet. You could display your comfortable spa-like atmosphere and your state-of-the-art tanning beds in the hope that someone finds your site via a search engine and is impressed enough to book an appointment... or

#2. You could look at building a scheduling system that would allow your existing customers to book their own appointments online. Your employees would be freed up to build an active list of client email addresses which could be used to promote special offers to your existing client base which would allow you to maintain your existing clients while attracting and keeping new ones.

While the first idea of using the Internet to attract new customers is not an uncommon one, most people have found this to be less successful than they hoped, especially if your market is restricted to a small town or single location. The second idea uses a new way of thinking. Rather than only focusing on attracting new clients, the scheduling software adds value, service and convenience to the existing client base. Plus, by gathering valued client data, you open up a simple way to communicate various in-store promotions directly to an existing customer which helps to build brand awareness and customer loyalty.

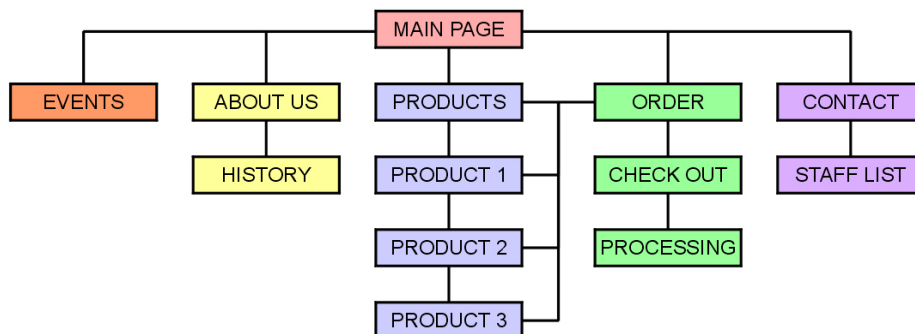
Part Two: Building a Road Map (Navigation is Key)

How can you reach your end goal without a good plan? Not easily. Many websites are put together during the process of development and this can work reasonably well if your site is very small, but I would encourage you to take time to build a “Road Map”. A road map is a simple outline (similar to the structure of a family tree) that shows how people will navigate your site and how they can reach key information quickly and easily. If your site will have multiple pages you will need to start with the main page of your website, then flow down to secondary pages and even sub pages of these secondary pages. Think about how you would like your prospective visitors to move through your site. You can use your main page to bring focus to specific products, services or events which could change how your site is navigated.

The Illustration below will give you an idea of how a proper Road map should look. This illustration was created on the computer but yours can work just as well drawn on a piece of paper. Two things to note:

1. The use of color for each section. This allows each section to be easily defined which is especially helpful with larger websites.
2. Some sections connect in more than one place. The Products section always leads directly to the Order page. This could be done with links from product photos etc. that lead directly to your Order page. Any increased navigation that can be added will make your more effective.

MY WEBSITE ROADMAP



Once you have a general Road Map built, it is very important to make sure your site design reflects an easy to read and easy to understand navigation. All good websites are ones that can be navigated easily and obviously. Many web designers today are creating cryptic and/or unclear navigation which causes visitors to become frustrated or lost in the site. This usually causes them to leave your site in search of a competitor with better navigation. A general rule with navigation is all of your major topics (main page and top row of items on your road map) should be available on every page of the site. If sub sections can be navigated off of the main menu as well then it is even better, but having sub sections navigating within the major topic page is also acceptable.

Part Three: Site editing, Automation and E-Commerce

If your site will have repeat visitors, then having a simple and easy to execute game plan for site updates is crucial. Will your website need a product database for a shopping cart? Or will it be more information based? Many service related companies like to present before and after samples of projects so it is a good idea to review all of the items that will need to be edited on an on going basis. Keeping your website fresh and up-to-date is one of the most important aspects of running an effective website. Updates could be changing products in your shopping cart, editing an event calendar or just changing the odd photograph once in a while so the site doesn't look stale. Typically, changes can be done manually by a web design company, an in house webmaster, or by implementing an automated CMS software solution as I mentioned in "Part One".

Note: Before you start development of your site it is a good idea to determine who will be in charge of doing website updates and how much time will be required to stay on top of them. Many companies have great expectations but are often too busy to do simple site updates. Having a good game plan ahead of time will allow you to prepare for how much time and staff you are willing to commit to site updates.

There are a number of pros and cons for each site editing option.

Outsourcing to a web design firm

Pros:

1. Work will be done professionally and reflect the image your company deserves.
2. Because each page is edited manually your site can have a unique look throughout rather than a site that uses the same template over and over on every page.
3. Many web firms can also provide automated software solutions.

Cons:

1. Good design firms are busy so getting edits done right away may not always be possible.
2. The costs for their services are more expensive than hiring an in house web master or using a automated solution.

Hiring an in house webmaster

Pros:

1. You have a designated person who can do any changes to the site right away.
2. Because each page is edited manually your site can have a unique look throughout rather than a site that uses the same template over and over on every page.

Cons:

1. If your website is small then there may not be enough work to keep a full time webmaster busy.
2. The abilities and quality of the work done by a low cost webmaster or employee many not reflect the image and/ or quality your company is looking for so over time your site can degrade from its original design.

Using Automated Software (CMS)

Content Management Software or CMS is technology that allows even the most novice computer user to update content, product databases and images by using simple forms or WYSIWYG text editors. Automated software will save you time and money in the long run as you or your staff takes on the roll of webmaster for your site.

Pros:

1. Editing can be done by anyone with moderate computer skills.
2. Edits can be completed quickly and easily.
3. You save money for ongoing editing because you are doing it yourself.

Cons:

1. There is an upfront cost for the software. You need to weigh what the cost to have a design firm or webmaster add in the initial content vs. adding it yourself using the automated software.
2. If the software is limited to only one template design then your site can look somewhat repetitive. Look for products that allow multiple options for adding multiple pages and sections with multiple templates. Some solutions also allow adding different page headers and navigation buttons for different pages.

E-commerce

Selling online has never been better. Kids and grandparents alike are embracing the convenience and value of shopping online. If your company needs an e-commerce solution then you will need to look at implementing an online “shopping cart” and also a method payment for your customers. The term shopping cart simply means that visitors can add multiple items into an electronic cart that can be purchased using a credit card or other method of online payment.

The Shopping cart

A good shopping cart program is one that allows flexibility in adding product categories and individual items. You should look for a program that will allow your online product catalog to scale as your company grows. The navigation of the product list should be simple and organized so customers can find products quickly.

Payment Processing

You will need to contact your financial institution to set-up an account for credit card processing or other online payment processing company like PayPal™ etc. If your market is younger then a PayPal™ account may be all you need. If you are looking to attract the general population then credit cards are still the payment method of choice.

Digital Certificates and Site Security

All financially sensitive or personal information that is transmitted on your website needs to be sent through a secure digitally encrypted location. This involves installing a digital certificate from a company like Verisign™ onto your server. Once the certificate has been installed you will access the digitally encrypted section of your website by using the https:// prefix before your domain instead of just http://. The addition of the “s” means this site is secure.

Many hosting companies can help with purchasing and setting up digital certificates. You may even be able to use an existing certificate that is already setup on your web developer’s server. This can usually be purchased for less than buying your own certificate. Some financial institutions require you



to have your own certificate residing within your actual domain so using a secondary certificate may not be an option for you.

Part Four: Setting a Budget

Now that you know the function of your website you will need to define a budget for the different components of your site. This will involve separating items with variable pricing (ie: design services) from the items that will have a set price (ie: CMS software). Many items can vary greatly in cost so it is good to prepare a general budget before you start shopping for design services and CMS software. Everyone wishes for the Ferrari of websites, but things like content administration and shopping cart modules can be just as important as or more important than the actual design of the site. This is not to say your site should not look its very best, but you will need to first determine what the intangible items are first to see what a reasonable budget is for your site design, animations and other visual bells and whistles. There is nothing worse than having a beautiful looking website that doesn't provide anything to the potential customer. Remember, the goal is to attract client then deliver products or services in a simple, visually appealing way.

Here is a breakdown of potential items that will need to be budgeted:

1. Domain name registration (ie: yourdomain.com)
2. Server setup and monthly hosting
3. Design services
4. Site formatting and custom programming
5. CMS and shopping cart software
6. Purchasing a digital certificate and setup

Note: It is a good idea to look at registering your domain name right away as many names are limited. You should however choose your web development and CMS software solution provider before you setup your server. Many servers run on Microsoft software and others use UNIX platforms, so each will support different software applications. You will need to make sure you discuss these options with your web professional to ensure you have the right server for the software tools you will be using.

Part Five: Choosing a Firm

You've reviewed how your new website will function, you've got a road map of all the site topics and you have a general budget in mind. Now it's time to start shopping for the right web company! There are thousands of website companies with skills ranging from east to west. The challenge that faces you is to find one that fits your needs and your budget. You may want to find a company by surfing the web, or you may have a business contact that can make a recommendation of a company they have used... or you may want to just pick up the phone book to see who is offering web services in your local area. Whichever way you chose to track down a reliable web service provider there are some very important things to look for in order to make your experience a smooth one.

1. **A Complete Solution Provider:** Does the company provide a complete solution to your needs? Or will they only provide the design services then outsource the CMS software or leave you to source these products? Partnering with a one stop shop is always better than trying to piece different companies together.
2. **Experience:** How long has the company been in business? Although the Internet is still young you need to make sure you pick a company that has been around the block at least once. A company that is new to web development may get your project 80% completed only to leave you wondering if you will ever launch your site.
3. **Portfolio:** What kinds of websites are presented in their online portfolio? Are they versatile? Do they all look the same? Are they limited in style, shape or originality? Will you be buying something that is just an unoriginal duplication of many other sites that have been designed?

You want to find a company that has the ability to understand their customer and design a site that will not only reflect a quality image but also draw your customer in to something unique and appealing.

4. **Get Referrals:** If you are ready to make a decision about a company it is always prudent to ask any companies in the running for a few referrals—or better yet, just email a few customers in their portfolio directly and ask them how their experience was working with Company X. Ask them if they could change one thing about their experience with Company X what would it be? You should get some good feedback and a general idea of the strengths and weaknesses of the company.

Part Six: Marketing

Once you have your site ready for the launch you will need to prepare a plan for how your site will be promoted and marketed. The “build it and they will come” philosophy of the early 90’s worked for a while but the Internet is a very competitive arena that can swallow websites by the millions. It is very important to have a game plan and possibly a financial budget allotted purely to marketing. Be sure to speak to your web development company about search engine marketing and promotion before you begin your website design. This will allow you to think about how the search engines will react to the content of your website and also allow you to get a head start on indexing and keyword generation.