



PLANNING YOUR WEB SITE

Issues you should consider before developing your web site

OUT OF THE TREES
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INTRODUCTION

There are many factors that contribute to a successful web site; branding, creativity, writing, technology and organisation are all important, but careful planning is what can really make or break a site.

Whether you're developing a high-budget e-commerce site, or a simple online brochure, a little preparation will keep your project focused, on-budget and on-schedule.

Over the following pages we outline some of the main things you should consider before you or your designer/developer begin work on your Web site.



1: CONSIDER YOUR NEEDS

The foundation of a successful online project lies in having a clear understanding of its overall goals and objectives. So the first thing to do is to make a list of your primary objectives and needs — make them as specific as possible.

Things to consider include:

- How can a web site help your organisation achieve its short and long-term goals (for example, attract clients, advertise a service, increase your visibility, report results)?
- How can a web site assist you with your day-to-day operations (for example, reduce time spent answering questions on the phone, lower the amount of money spent on sending information by post, allow geographically-diverse associates to collaborate on projects)?

You may find that you have several objectives for the site. *Increase the number of visitors to your existing site* is one goal, *decrease calls to customer service may be another*, and *sell more products* is a third. Although there may be several goals and many separate audiences to cater for, it is important that you have one clear, targeted message.

Once you have decided on your primary objective, you can then prioritise your remaining objectives into second and third levels of importance.



2: CONSIDER YOUR AUDIENCE

The next thing to do is to spend some time identifying the target audience for your site. Who do you want to attract to your site? An answer of “everyone” is not going to help you or your designer create the best possible site, so here are some choices to consider:

- **EXISTING CUSTOMERS** — this can be an excellent way to retain loyalty among your current customers; help them out and give them a site that continues the good will you’ve already created through your professional services.
- **PROSPECTIVE CUSTOMERS** — people who are in the market for your particular product or service. You need to both sell your product/service and establish your company’s credibility. A quality web site can help establish your credibility in the same way that a well designed brochure can exude ‘professionalism’ and ‘experience’ to a potential customer.
- **CUSTOMERS OF YOUR COMPETITORS** — one way that you can increase your business is by steering people to your door from your competitors.
- **DONORS OR SPONSORS** — charities and other non-profit organisations may need to attract supporters or financial contributors.
- **PEOPLE IN YOUR COMMUNITY** — if you have a small, local business, then you might want to create a site that focuses on the needs of your local community.



- **EXPERTS IN A SPECIFIC FIELD** — if your audience is built from professionals in a specific field (for example, engineers or teachers), your site design should reflect their needs and interests.

If your target audience consists of more than one group, try to list them in order of importance.

Next, consider qualities that define your target audience. Think about their ages and locations; your company's relationship with them; how experienced they are with computers and the Internet; and any distinguishing qualities they have, e.g., it could be that the majority of your clients are female business managers, or the elderly.

Keeping in mind your key objective from Step 1, try to define the type of relationship you wish to have with the visitors to your web site. Do you want to focus on giving existing customers or members an added-value service, or do you want to use the site primarily to generate new customers? If you're trying to expand your audience, consider where these new audience members might come from. For example, you may be aiming to break into a specific foreign market.



3: CONSIDER YOUR VISITORS' NEEDS

Once you have outlined your target audience, you should consider what they will want from your site, and how they will use it.

For example, is your audience Internet savvy, or will visitors need a bit more guidance? Are they familiar with your organisation, or will you have to go into greater detail about what you do? What information or services are your visitors seeking? What is the easiest and most effective method for your visitors to get information and services? Again, put yourself in the shoes of your visitors — what are they coming to find or learn?

Also, keep in mind that people are busy and have short attention spans, especially online. Keep information simple, clear, concise and relevant.

By now you should have a good idea of your site's objectives, your target audience and their needs. Put these goals in writing — try to make them SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timed — and make sure they are close at hand throughout the development process.



4: CONSIDER THE SITE'S FUNCTION

Based on your key objectives and audience profile, you can begin listing the specific information, features, or activities your web site will provide.

For example, a site's objectives might be "to provide information about our company's new line of widgets" and this site's audience definition might be "prospective customers". The main requirements for this site could be:

- Provide pictures, prices, and fact-sheets on all of our widgets;
- Provide ordering and service information;
- Provide an overview of widgets to interest prospective customers and encourage them to use the products.

Try to establish your priorities for the site. Below is a list of some common uses for web sites:

- provide details about your organisation or company;
- sell services or products;
- facilitate internal communication between staff or members;
- act as your key promotional tool;
- promote action towards a cause;
- foster your organisation's culture;
- function as a 'portal', offering visitors links to other sites;



- supply information on indirectly-related subjects (e.g., a hotel might have a web site with information on local sightseeing attractions);
- act as a contact point for clients or customers;
- expand existing marketing tactics;
- offer services that you currently provide in person (e.g., a fitness club might provide application forms online);
- supply up-to-date news regarding your organisation;
- offer interactive tools for your visitors, such as polls, interactive maps, a photo gallery, games discussion forums, and so on.



5: CONSIDER THE SITE'S STYLE

Only once you have decided on your objectives, audience and functionality can you begin to think about the site's aesthetics.

Does the site have to reflect any existing marketing materials, such as brochures or packaging? Do you already have a logotype or corporate colour scheme?

One of the best things that you can do for your web designer to ensure you're on the same wavelength is to spend time exploring other sites on the web, including those of your competitors, to get ideas for your own. Write down their URL (web address) and a note or two about what you did or didn't like about the specific site. The designer can then visit the same sites and start to understand whether you like open designs with lots of 'white space', trendy animation, colourful graphics, lots of short pages or a small number of long pages, etc.

Have a think about the sort of qualities that reflect your company or organisation's identity. As a starting point, select a few words from the following list — feel free to add your own:

fun	light	earthy	warm	hi-tech
refined	bold	elegant	funky	simple
accessible	eye-catching	functional	natural	detailed
stylish	subtle	cute	cool	colourful
solid	ornate	modern	casual	plain
conservative	cutting-edge	traditional	serious	clean

STEP 6: WORK OUT YOUR BUDGET

The final major step in planning your web site is deciding on your budget for the project. It is important to allocate sufficient resources for all aspects of the project, and not just the initial site creation. Every web site has the following costs associated with it:

- **DEVELOPMENT COSTS:** this includes the initial creation of the site and any necessary content;
- **HOSTING COSTS:** the expenses associated with running the server that hosts the site. Small sites may use budget 'shared' hosting, whereas a larger and busier site will require its own dedicated server/s;
- **MANAGEMENT COSTS:** this includes keeping the site's content up-to-date, creating new content, analysing visitor statistics, and reviewing feedback from users.
- There are also additional **SUNDRY COSTS** that need to be considered. For example, updating business stationary and company vehicles with the new domain name; advertising the site (online or by more traditional means); hiring new staff to deal with enquiries generated by the site, etc.

Remember to take all of these expenses into account when working out your budget.



CONCLUSION

By now, you should have a clearer idea of what you're trying to achieve with your site. If not, we'll be happy to guide you through through the planning of your site. Either way, why not contact Out of the Trees to find out how we can help make your web site a success.

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