

Secrets of Successful Web Sites

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When people call and tell me they want a website they are often shocked when I ask, "Why?" After all, it's my business to build websites, so why would I question the motivations of a hot lead? But it's really the most important question to ask and every single decision affecting the ultimate success of the site will follow directly from the answers to that question. If you don't know what your objectives are, you'll get sidetracked, bogged down, waste resources on features you don't need or miss good opportunities. And you will have no way to judge whether your website is successful.

So, the opening question is always, "Why?"

So, why DO you want a website?

Start by determining what you expect your website to do for your business. There are many possible objectives, but some of the most common are:

- Sell products to a wider market
- Reach deep into a narrow, niche market
- Shorten sales cycle
- Reduce demands on support staff
- Collect leads for sales staff
- Reduce spending on expensive printed materials and postage
- Provide timely information to outside sales force.

Notice that nowhere on the list do you see the objective: Have a website. A website can be a useful, cost-effective tool for achieving your objectives, but it is NOT an objective.

Be focused. Often people think they can save money by having one site that "does it all." But a "split personality" web site can cost you business. For example, if your company sells batteries

you would have a completely different marketing approach for retail consumers vs. industrial purchasers. Two separate, focused sites will allow you to speak directly and clearly to each market segment.

Once you have decided what your actual business goals are, it's time to look at how a website can help you to reach them. The list of objectives provides an essential guideline for every step of the process. Any page of the website that doesn't move you toward your goals is most likely a waste of time and money.

Okay, I know my objectives. What's next?

Now it's time to gather information that will determine the content, style and features of your site. Some important things you should know are

- Who is your target audience?
- What is your competition doing on the web?
- What will site visitors want to see and do?

Who is your target audience?

Describe your ideal site visitors. Who are they? How old are they? What are their interests? Jobs? What problems or needs do they have that you can help them with? If you know your customers and their problems, you can present your products or services in a way that will be irresistible to them.

What level of technological access does your audience have? The latest web techniques may impress high-end technology businesses where users typically have current software and high-speed connections, but will drive away less sophisticated users who have older systems and slower connections.

What is your competition doing on the web?

Go forth and browse. Who is your competition? What are their websites like? Do you have a large competitor who already has control of your market? The mere presence of competitors should not discourage you from staking your own claim. But knowing what has already been done, will put you in a better position to decide what direction to take with your site. Perhaps you can find a new angle or a special niche that will separate your company from the competition. Or maybe you provide complementary services that would make an interesting joint venture with another company.

What will your visitors want to see and do?

Go back to your objectives to create a list. For each objective, you should be able to define relevant pages or interactive features. If one of your objectives is to increase the market for your service, you might want to create an educational section or on-line database of questions and answers. If an objective is to shorten your sales cycle, you'll want to provide clear information about how you do business and tools that allow visitors to pre-qualify themselves.

Once you have your content list, you can begin to organize it into an outline that will serve as the basic structure for your site. Try to look at your site with "outside eyes." Many businesses make the mistake of organizing their websites to match their company org chart. That org chart may work well for your managing internal business, but will it make sense to someone who knows nothing about your company?

Can I have my website now?

Your outline will form the basis for the structure of the site.

Begin gathering and creating the materials you will need to produce your web site: graphics, photographs, catalogs, brochures, copy.

Web site design should follow logically from the objectives and content. The message should be clear and focused. Nothing should be hidden or hard to get to - find a balance that minimizes the number of clicks to get to any page within the site, without confusing users with too many choices on a single page. The most important content should be the most prominent.

Graphics and features should be appropriate for the intended audience. A site that is primarily for marketing purposes needs to make a very strong first impression and have a clear and quick call to action. Flashy graphics and bright colors are inappropriate on a site users access frequently, such as a company intranet or web-based application.

If a solid foundation has been laid, the site will come together easily. The navigation will be clear and the content will flow into it naturally. Thoughtful attention to the user's point of view will pave the way for a web site that is clear and easy for even first-time visitors to use.

How will I know if my website is successful?

Like any other facet of your business, a website must pull its weight. Schedule a review - 3 months, 6 months; the type of site and its importance to your business will determine your timing. In the meantime, keep a file for notes. If an idea for a new feature occurs to you, jot it down. Make notes of comments from customers or employees. When people contact you through the website, ask them how they found your site.

When it's time for the site review, look over your original list of objectives.

- Has the site helped you make progress toward your business goals?
- Is your list still good?
- Have any previous objectives become less or more important to your business?
- Have new needs come up?

Look over your notes

- Do user comments point to confusion about navigation? Slow loading times?
- Have employees or associates been happy with site performance?
- Have you received suggestions for new sections that would fit in with site objectives?
- When was the last time you checked the site for broken or outdated links?

Examine site traffic reports for trends.

- What areas are getting the most traffic? The least traffic?
- If a section is very popular, how can you capitalize on that?
- If a section is not receiving many visitors, how can you make it more prominent?
- Are there sections that can be eliminated?
- If visitors are touching the front page only and not going deeper, how can you make deeper content more inviting or appealing?

It's not an exact science, but a little time and attention to the site on a regular basis will keep your web business on track.

The result of your review should be a plan of action: Reaffirm your objectives, fix or eliminate what isn't working, enhance what is and look for new ways to use your site to reach your highest goals.

What's your dream?

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