

Web Sites 101

Web sites are a fairly simple process to complete. Like any other marketing tool, the final design is determined by need. Form follows function. The value of a Web site is that its form can be changed to reflect a changing set of functional needs. The mistake that many people make when designing a Web site for their company is to set up a simple tool that is not flexible enough to handle the changes and turns that Web sites require. They launch online brochures that are nothing more than an electronic version of printed collateral.

Web sites must be flexible to survive. They must drive traffic to your company, answer questions, and reflect information resources for a varied list of viewership. All this mandates more than a static picture of your materials. Programming, interactivity and an easy-to use site map are required to engage your viewers to be involved with your company, not just view it from afar.

Companies struggle to have their Web site informative, ahead of the curve, current and attractive to their potential client base. They need to get the prospect interested, involved, informed and prone to purchase – all in one 25-second session online. And they need to do this all with a limited budget and staffing.

Despite dwindling budgets, companies are finding that they require an online presence. A good Web site can expand the customer base or constituency beyond regional borders. With the right site, companies can capture and promote valuable strategic partnerships and sponsors, communicate with other field offices, create a flow of online purchases, and get their product or service out to millions of individuals who would otherwise not be exposed to their organization.

Once a company has decided to spend the money on a Web site, the key is finding a Web Developer that meets their needs. Unfortunately, the answer for many companies is to hire the least expensive person and hope for the best. Web design software and technology has become very easy to access and very cost effective. If you find someone who can use this software, great! Yes, any Web presence is better than none at all. But just be realistic enough to know that, like any other makeshift or desktop-published collateral, you are fulfilling a short-term need and not creating a final product that will meet your needs for the long run.

Step One: Plan

The trick of getting the most out of your Web dollars is planning. You need to know how to prepare for your present and future requirements. The following are some of the planning considerations prior to talking with a Web Site Developer. Planning will help you get the results you want and also choose the right developer for the job:

URL:	Make sure that you reserve as many versions of possible site names right away. Many times site address names can drive the design and concept portions of the site development, and not getting the name you want can change your view on that direction to go in.
Content:	Know what you want to say. Be consistent with other collateral and marketing copy. Also – stay current on your site. Make sure that you make room in the budget for Content Management Systems (CMS) in place to keep up to date.
Visuals:	The site should reflect your brand. Plan to have a consistent look using good quality images that are aligned with your other materials. The idea is to enhance and reaffirm your branding materials, not create new ones with the Web.
E-commerce:	Decide in advance if you are going to be selling anything online. For example, if you are planning to take online donations, make sure that you have the right online forms and a merchant account that will accept online transactions.
Site Map:	Make sure that you are clear on what pages or areas you want on your site. This will affect your buttons and navigation tools for the site. Nothing is worse that a site you get lost in. Be very clear on your organizational structure for your site.
Capturing:	You should consider having a registration page, opt-in, free download, or other means of capturing your online viewership. Data is king. Make sure you capture at least the first name and email address (and opt-in permission) of your guest.
E-marketing:	How will you drive traffic to your site? Don't forget to consider search engine optimization, key words, search engine placement, affiliate programs, RSS feeds, blogs, and the inclusion of your new Web address on all existing collateral in your Web plan.
Future Uses:	Plan out what other uses you may have for your site. Events, calendars, promotionals, interactive areas, polls, search engines, and online classrooms should all be considered as possibilities as your Web presence grows.

Step Two: Choose a Web Site Developer

When choosing a Web Site Developer, you need to make sure that you find someone that meets all of your requirements:

Credentials:	Make sure that they have the credentials and experience you can count on. They should be able to program and design in a number of platforms and programs. Ask for a list of sites that they've done and for their Web site address.
Relationship:	You will be developing a long-term relationship with your Developer, so make sure that you feel that you can work with this person and that there are no potential personality conflicts. If you are a non-profit, make sure to choose someone also that fits in with your NPO message and culture.
Consultant:	Make sure that they have a business-like "consultant" demeanor and talk plain English about technology. They will be working for YOU, so don't hire someone that talks down to you or makes you feel stupid about your technological experience or decisions.
Expense:	Make sure that this consultant will give you their prices and timelines up front. Don't ever choose to work with a tech consultant that charges by the hour for Web sites. Flat fee billing reflects experience and confidence and will give you the budgetary and emotional peace of mind that you need for this type of project.
Hosting:	Ask them about their hosting relationship. They should be able to give you a fair idea of cost and process for utilizing a particular hosting vendor. Ask for the vendor's Web address and check them out. Hosting servers should be local, reachable 24-7, using the back office hosting software you need to run, and give you a sense of security and confidence in their ability to host you site. What good is a site that is down all the time and you can't reach the tech?
Proposal:	Get the proposal in writing. It can be very short – even in the form of a memo – but it should outline the key timeline and expense aspects of meeting your present needs and possibly some ideas as to recommended additions to your plan that you hadn't considered. Make sure that all of the planning aspects you'd discussed are present in the proposal. You should have conceptual agreement as to the scope of work and timeline involved. As best as possible, you want to avoid addendum proposals later on for elements not considered in the earlier discussions.
Contract:	If you choose to go with a particular Web Site Developer, get a contract in writing outlining the specifics of your project and how they are expecting to be paid. Discuss expenses and what their fee will and will not cover. For example, hosting fees are usually separate from Web Site Development fees or Web Maintenance fees. Fees are usually paid half up front (upon signing the contract) and the other half within a period of time (anywhere from 30-90 days). If you have the whole budget available at once, it is good to ask if they would discount the price (usually by around 10%) if you were to pay the entire fee upfront.

Step Three: Initial Design Phase

Meet with your Web Site Developer as soon as you contract them and start the initial design phase. In this developmental stage of the Web site, you will be working with the Web Site Developer to pull together the look of your Web site. Supply them with all of the images, content, current collateral, and any other materials that the Developer will need to create the look you are trying to achieve. If you have some favorite sites, give them the addresses so that they can see what you like.

In about 15-20 days, the Web Site Developer should come back to you with some designs for you to see. These can be in print versions, but it is best to see them on a temporary Web site so that you can preview the visuals, fonts and colors as they will appear in cyberspace. They are very few fonts that will translate on the Web, and browser safe palettes are limited.

Often developers make the error of providing design samples using print-driven graphic programs. This results in a final design that can be vastly different from the original design concepts presented. A developer should know this challenge when dealing with web site design.

Lastly, remember to keep in mind that the design must also reflect all other branded collateral materials you will be using in conjunction with the Web site in your outreach and marketing efforts.

Step Four: Site Map

The Web Site Designer will be returning a site map for your review. This will look like a big flow chart and is a graphic representation of all your discussions, plans and notes to date regarding content and various means of site navigation. The map should be easy to follow. There are many new and cost effective ways of adding interactive buttons and toolbars to assist your viewer in finding exactly what they want in the site. Remember, the point of the site is ease of use for the viewer to understand and utilize your message – not get lost and leave. Site maps are worked on from the beginning and will take up to 30 days to complete.

Site maps are also a key element in achieving the best possible results when optimizing the site for Google and other major search engines.

Step Five: Tempsite Review

Once the architecture, content, design, and images are in place, you should be ready to see the site live on a temporary Web address supplied by the developer. This allows you to play with the content, navigation, interactive elements, forms, etc. and “break” the site. Get the bugs out. Find errors.

The tempsite is begun after the architecture and final content are received and signed off on and will take up to 90 days to program and complete. Changes and tweaking to the site can take up to 60 days to finalize. Make sure that everything works that way that you want it to.

During this phase, you can also take a look at your site optimization plan and make sure that people will be able to find you. Also, if you don’t already have a blast e-mail list set up with your

constituents and contacts, do so right away. Get your Web marketing in order. When you “go live” you will want to tell everyone you know.

Make sure that your server is ready to accept your live site and that your back office software systems administration is set to go. It is important to note that an inexpensive option for site hosting is a shared server. This is an acceptable option at the start of your Web site design process, but make sure that you are comfortable with your hosting company. Also, you can always move to a dedicated server as your site grows and requires more space.

Step Six: Go Live

“Going live” is when the site is moved to the permanent server and you can publicize your site to the world.

Step Seven: Maintenance

Any good Web Site Developer will talk to you about how you plan to maintain your site. You should have a maintenance contract with your Developer that included the following:

Updates:	Defines some specific choices in how to approach keeping your Web site content and visuals current. Updates are usually done on a once-a-month basis with urgent updates done immediately as needed. There are also a number of excellent CMS programs that are a very cost-effective alternative to hiring someone to maintain the site for you. Beware, however: CONTENT can be managed by just about anyone these days. DO NOT start messing around with the entire site post-launch. Reprogramming will often cost more than it was to initially pull together, and you don't want to be monkeying around with the site post-launch.
Hosting:	Hosting fees can be paid directly to the Developer if they have the relationship with the server vendor. You should recommend that all web-related expenses be paid directly by you, and therefore all assets will be controlled by you.
Web Stats:	A Developer will be able to provide you with monthly web statistics and a report that clearly explains what is happening on your site and how to improve viewership capture and traffic to the site. They should also give you access to a web statistics site and login to review and access your numbers when you need to.
Cost:	The typical monthly maintenance contract will cost anywhere from \$100 to \$600 a month, including hosting fees. The fee depends on what level of hosting you will need, the level of programming site administration your site requires, and the rate of content update you will anticipate. Maintenance contracts should also be flexible to grow or shrink with your needs

Developing a Web site can be a time consuming process, but it is a lot of fun when you feel involved in the process and prepared to meet the challenges as they arise. Plan well. Find the right Web Site Developer, and keep the site current. No matter how big or how small the site, a good site that is well designed, functional and easy to navigate will always shine above the other 888 million Web sites on the internet today.



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