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## **How to Build a Web Site that Gets Noticed Without Breaking the Bank**

The key to building a successful web site is planning. In the words of author Stephen Covey, you should should “begin with the end in mind.”

### **Purpose**

What is the site’s purpose? Is it to provide a professional presence? Prompt the user to call? Sell products or services online? A tool to save time?

It is imperative to clearly state the goals of the web site in writing. Goals provide clear direction which ultimately leads to better results. Companies that don’t have a web presence, or have one that looks outdated or functions improperly, may be considered amateurish or unprofessional. It reflects poorly on your company. So, begin with the end in mind. What do you want to accomplish and why?

### **User Demographics & Expectations**

In order to design an effective site it is important to know your customers. Who is your target market? What are their demographic characteristics? Male or female? Age bracket? From there, you can dig deeper. What are their buying habits? What magazines do they read? What do they do for recreation? Do they play golf? Hike? Answers to these questions will help gear the site to your audience and meet their expectations. It will also help you to choose imagery that reflects the audience.

Did you ever see a commercial on TV that you couldn’t stand? It’s probably because you were not in the target market. It’s the same with web sites. They should be designed with the users tastes in mind. A dental office web site will have a much different feel than a site that sells skate boards, because the audience and their expectations are different.

### **User Experience**

Ease of navigation is a key factor in putting together a successful site. Navigation buttons should have a consistent look, be titled intuitively, and located in the same place on each page.

It is also important to consider the browser that they are using. The site must work correctly for all major browsers. W3schools.com estimates that 46.3% of all internet users employ Firefox, a netscape derivative, as their browser of choice. Internet Explorer versions 8, 7 and 6 combined account for 36%. The remaining balance is divided up by Chrome, Safari and Opera. Chrome, Google’s browser is steadily gaining in popularity.

Display size should also be considered, although it is not as big a factor as it once was. W3schools.com estimates that 96% of all users have displays that are 1024 x 768. Google places that figure at 91%.

### **Cost Justification**

What is the average dollar value of one customer over a two year period? (Average dollar sales per customer X number of sales per year X 2 years.) From this calculation you can determine how many new customers the site needs to generate in order to pay for the site. (The total site cost divided by the figure in the above calculation.)

### **Who will maintain the site?**

It is important to decide at the outset, who will maintain the site. Sites can be designed for ease of maintenance, if that is a goal at the outset. Custom sites can be maintained using Adobe Dreamweaver, provided the person responsible for the updating is reasonably computer savvy and is provided with 2 - 3 hours of training. Sites may also be designed using a Content Management System (CMS) like Joomla or WordPress. Those sites are created using a template, but may be maintained with minimal training through a standard web browser. No additional software is required. The down side of using a CMS is that by using a template, your site may end up looking somewhat similar to someone else's.

### **Who are the primary decision makers?**

Keeping the number of decision makers small is important in keeping the cost down, as design costs are based on time. Getting a larger sized committee to agree on a color is sometimes a tough task, let alone site-specific characteristics. Decision groups sized from one to three persons are ideal. An odd number is better.

### **Write the Text Content**

Writing the content is a key step in the process. You can save a good deal of time and money by writing the content yourself. After all, you know your business better than anyone else. The text content should be broken down by category. Those categories become the buttons for your site. Massaging the text, getting it into it's final form, before designing the site can save a good deal of money by allowing the designer to know how to accommodate the quantity of text to be included on each page.

### **Flow Chart**

Use the text content to create a flow chart for the entire site, showing the content for each page and how the pages relate to each other. This will become the road map or blueprint to follow during the design process.

### **Imagery**

Using high quality photographs and imagery is crucial. Photos or images that are blurry or pixelated reflect poorly on your organization. Use quality lifestyle imagery that is appealing to your target market. Appropriate lifestyle imagery will help the user to relate to your site and create a more positive mental impression. Istockphoto.com is a good source for inexpensive lifestyle photography and useful illustrations. It is important

to follow copyright law and not to use someone else's imagery without their written permission. When using images from istockphoto, you are granted a royalty free license, which includes permission to use the image.

### **Cascading Style Sheets (CSS)**

A Cascading Style Sheet is a file that controls the look and feel of the site in one location. The CSS file controls the size and color of fonts, the size and characteristics of table cells (whether they are fixed or have variable height or width), link characteristics (color and underlining) and so on. Huge cost savings result from using style sheets because you can make site-wide changes from one location, rather than making the changes to each individual page. For example, you may need to change to a larger font size to accommodate an older audience. You can do that simply and efficiently in a style sheet.

### **What Style of Web Site Do You Like?**

Take a look at other sites and list three to five that you like and detail why. Also find at least three that you don't like and list why. This will help you determine what to shoot for during the design phase. You don't have to re-invent the wheel. At the same time, due to copyright law, you can't copy or re-use someone else's work.

### **Sizing Up the Competition**

What do your competitor's sites look like? You should keep that in mind during the design phase so that your site can stand out from the crowd, yet be appropriate for your industry.

### **SEO**

You can't talk about "getting noticed" without talking about Search Engine Optimization (SEO), which is a subject all on it's own. In general, search engines like Google, Yahoo and Bing, use an algorithm to evaluate your site's relevance to the user. They rate your site accordingly. SEOconsultants.com lists the top rated search engines for February 2010 as: Google with 71%, Yahoo with 15% and Bing with 10%. To get noticed, the idea is to configure your site so that you are rated highly in the organic search, as opposed to the paid advertisements at the top and sides of each page.

### **Site Design**

After you've done your homework, you're ready for the site design. By following the principles outlined above, you will be able to construct a site that meets your goals, is easy to navigate, has compelling imagery, exceeds your audience's expectations, and sets you apart from your competition.

If you want to tackle the design phase on your own, WordPress's content management system is a good option. If you are somewhat computer savvy, it's relatively easy. Also, you may consider hiring a web designer at this point. If you do, everything you've done so far will save you money. And, you'll have a clear direction for the designer to follow, culminating in a positive result.