

Web site Design Guidelines

Before you start making Web pages, you need to put in some serious thought as to what kind of site you want.

As Web site authoring and management software becomes ever more usable, so the process of Web site construction becomes less of a black art. One thing that won't change, though, is the need to plan your Web site carefully before you go ahead and create it.

Despite the lessons provided by the Desktop Publishing revolution of the 1980s, all too many Web designers in the 1990s have fallen into the same trap: becoming beguiled by the tools at their disposal without thinking hard enough about the basic purpose of the end product. For 'death by font overload', read 'death by widget overload'.

The planning exercise will set the agenda for your Web operation, determining, among other things, the kind of content you'll be delivering, whether or not you need to hire dedicated staff to construct and manage your site, and what kind of hardware and software will be required to get the job done.

Carried out properly, the initial stages of the Web design process should help to clarify the objectives for creating the site in the first place, thereby ensuring that no unrealistic expectations are raised that would inevitably lead to disappointment. After all, it's not a good idea to deliver a glorified home page when it turns out that everyone is expecting a fully fledged e-commerce site.

In this document, we'll examine five questions that you should ask yourself when planning a Web site.

- What's the site's exact purpose?
- What's its target audience?
- What should the site look like and what content should it carry?
- How Users Read on the Web.
- How will the site's effectiveness be assessed once it's launched?

If you follow something resembling this procedure, you'll have a fair chance of ending up with a Web site that benefits your organisation.

What's the Web site's purpose?

Web sites are created for many different reasons - to inform, entertain, promote or sell, for example. As a result, they can range from the equivalent of a fly poster or a billboard in cyberspace to a virtual department store, public library or corporate headquarters. There are Web counterparts of many other real-world entities, the enthusiasts' club, the professional bureau, the specialist information exchange and so on - as well as sites that act as nodes within or portals to the Web itself. All of these different kinds of site will require different approaches their planning and construction.

Once you've decided on your site's basic purpose, several aspects will fall into place. Clearly, if you're trying to sell products to the public, for example, then you're not looking at an intranet site lurking behind your company's firewall. More importantly, you'll have an idea of the proposed site's size and complexity, and whether you're likely to want to design or host the site in-house or out-source all or part of it.

Most Web sites are created in order to boost a company's profits - either directly or by increasing its visibility and therefore generating business. Above all, this requires a clear idea of whom it is you're trying to reach via your site.

What's the site's target audience?

A Web site is a publication, and no publication succeeds unless it knows its audience. You might or might not be in a position to carry out formal market research, but you need to at least form a mental picture of your target audience based on a clear understanding of your organisation's operation.

In many cases, the target audience follows naturally from the definition of your Web site's purpose. For example, if your site is designed to sell a product or a range of products, then the audience is clearly anyone who has bought, or is likely to buy, similar products.

Other types of site can be harder to pin down in this respect, but it's essential that the effort be made because an understanding of your audience will influence every aspect of site design. For example, do you need to publish in multiple languages? What tone of voice will your site adopt, authoritative or humorous? How should it look - graphical or text heavy?

What should the site look like and what content should it carry?

The quality of a Web site's look and feel, and the relevance of its content are crucial, but you can't expect to get these right unless you're clear about the purpose of your Web site and the identity of its audience. How often have you visited a Web site knowing what you would like to find there, only to be disappointed by inappropriate design and out-of-date or sub-standard content?

As a vehicle for delivering content, the Web provides great opportunities, but is strewn with pitfalls. Good planning will help you to avoid the latter. For example, you'll naturally want to make your site visually appealing, but this shouldn't be at the cost of alienating visitors with limited bandwidth. This will hopefully become less of a problem over time, but the fact remains that Web sites can all too easily become over-designed, ending up bedecked with distracting elements, such as rotating logos, flashing text and other gratuitous graphical elements that detract from the message you're trying to get across. Graphics that you decided to place on your site should work for, rather than distract from, your content,

As well as visitor bandwidth, you'll need to consider the size of the monitor owned by your average visitor, because this will affect the way you package your content. Generally, people don't like to read large amounts of information on screen, preferring to receive screen-sized 'chunks' that don't require excessive scrolling. Navigation is also crucial, so dividing up your Web site into logical groups of pages and making sure that signposting is clear are all essential.

Remember, too, that although the Web is a new medium, some long-established publishing principles still apply: if you want text to look good on-screen, hire or consult a typographer at the design stage; and if you want your content to read well, make sure that it's professionally edited before being deposited in cyberspace.

How Users Read on the Web - (They don't.)

People rarely read Web pages word by word; instead, they scan the page, picking out individual words and sentences. In a recent study it was found that 79 percent of test users always scanned any new page they came across; only 16 percent read word-by-word.

As a result, Web pages have to employ scannable text, using

- highlighted keywords (hypertext links serve as one form of highlighting; typeface variations and color are others)
- meaningful sub-headings (not "clever" ones)
- bulleted lists
- one idea per paragraph (users will skip over any additional ideas if they are not caught by the first few words in the paragraph)
- the inverted pyramid style, starting with the conclusion
- half the word count (or less) than conventional writing

We found that credibility is important for Web users, since it is unclear who is behind information on the Web and whether a page can be trusted. Credibility can be increased by high-quality graphics, good writing, and use of outbound hypertext links. Links to other sites show that the authors have done their homework and are not afraid to let readers visit other sites.

Users detested "marketese"; the promotional writing style with boastful subjective claims ("hottest ever") that currently is prevalent on the Web. Web users are busy: they want to get the straight facts. Also, credibility suffers when users clearly see that the site exaggerates.

How will the site's effectiveness be assessed?

Your site is now published. Do you (a) sit back and wait for the plaudits and cash to roll in or (b) monitor your site's performance against measurable goals you've set during the planning phase? Clearly, the second approach is more likely to reap benefits.

As well as monitoring visitor behaviour and your organisation's bottom line, you might want to post the odd questionnaire on the site, possibly with some inducement such as a prize, in order to discover what visitors think of its design and content, and how it can be improved.

If traffic isn't up to scratch, make sure your site's URL is registered widely enough with search engines and that the information submitted to your chosen engines is in the correct format. Review other forms of advertising, including banner exchanges on other sites, and adverts in traditional media.