



A Whitepaper from The Digital Forge

10 Key Considerations for Web Site Planning

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Alex's guide to the City, *The Alex Technique*, (Headline £7.99) is available in bookshops or from Telegraph Books Direct (0541 557222).

Overview

The purpose of this white paper is to provide 'food for thought' to anyone who is either considering or already has a web presence. There are a very large number of websites around today that fail to deliver on what is expected from them. There are many reasons for this, most of which are down to poor planning, execution or maintenance. This document serves to highlight the 10 most common 'pit falls'.

Consideration 1 – Your Site Goal

Before embarking on a web project, have a clear goal for your site in mind. The web is a powerful medium for getting your message across, but you must have clarity about what it is you wish to achieve. Web sites can be used to:

- Create a corporate presence
- Sell goods and/or services on-line from a global 'shop window'
- Sell product in a dynamic way (e.g. auctions)
- Generate leads for conventional sales follow-up
- Provide information to netizens 'at large'
- Convey a message
- Act as a customer interface
- Provide after-sales support
- Act as an index to other relevant sites
- Generate revenue directly (dynamic information provision)

In order for any site to work well it must be designed, from the outset, with an ultimate strategy in mind. Only then does the end result stand a chance of living up to expectations.

Consideration 2 – Target Your Audience

The web community is as eclectic as society itself. Unlike traditional mediums such as newspapers or television, it is not 'programmed' by an editor to appeal to certain groups of people. Because anybody can find their way to your site, you must ensure that the style, presentation and content are in tune with your target audience. In other words, strive to make your site 'sticky' to those whom you would like to stay!

Different groups respond in different ways. Nobody enjoys being blatantly 'sold to', although many 'expert' sites (i.e. those that provide specialist information about a narrow range of topics) do very well with reference sales of relevant products. These products are promoted on the site in the context of relevant information and users of the site can simply follow a link to purchase the connected product.

Consideration 3 – Traffic Generation

It is often said that the success of a retail business is down to three things: location, location and location. In the world of web marketing, nothing has changed. The only difference is that on the web, you get to choose your location! 'Location' on the high street = passing foot traffic = number of hits (in web parlance). With care and effort you can have the web equivalent of a 3 floor mega-store on Oxford Street. The key to driving traffic to your site is a good ranking with the search engines such as Google, Yahoo, AltaVista, Lycos etc where people start off a web search. There are many things that govern your ranking; the page number and position on which you appear for any given search word. A thorough understanding of search engines and the myriad of other traffic generation techniques is an absolute must for success in any e-venture.

Consideration 4 – Profile Your Visitors

The web has one huge advantage over traditional methods of marketing and communications. It allows you to track the visitors that come to your site. You can record:

- Where visitors come from
 - to help you target your resources to those traffic generators that work best for your site.
- How long they stay on a given page
 - If you are using several different approaches to get your message across, which one is working the best?
- What type of computer they are using
- What type of browser software they are using
- What country they are from

All this information, and more, is available from every visitor to your site.

Consideration 5 – Niche Markets Are Very Web Friendly

Some of the most successful e-commerce sites today revolve around niche markets. Let us consider the example of a 'rare map dealer' in a small UK town. This is an example of an ideal e-business opportunity. The business was located in small retail premises where stock was held. The shop attracted a few visitors during the week, a few more at weekends, some of whom had travelled 50 miles to visit. As its catchment area was small, the owner had investigated production of a mail-order catalogue. This had worked reasonably well but was expensive and slow to produce and because of the nature of the business, once an item had been sold, its space in the catalogue was wasted. The ideal solution was a website. This gave the shop a global catchment, allowing visitors for all over the world to visit the 'on-line shop' on the web, which was updated monthly with colour photographs of the pieces for sale. Because of the specialist nature of the business 'rare British maps' it was possible to obtain #1 ranking positions in the main search engines. Pieces could be ordered on-line with credit-card payment 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Needless to say, the business did not look back!

Consideration 6 – Keep You're Eye on the Ball & Update Regularly

As a marketplace, the web moves very quickly and it is vital that you stay ahead of your competition. In order to do this, you need to monitor your search engine positioning for the keywords that you select. Search engines are continually updating their databases, usually fully automatically. If your site happens to be off-line for a short period of time when a search engine decides to re-index you, then your site will be dropped from the records. Because of the sheer scale of the web, it is impossible for the search engines to keep on top of every site and they generally only need the slightest excuse to drop a listing. It is vital that you stay on top of this as a wily competitor may usurp your high ranking in the engine!

Consideration 7 – All Web Sites are Created Equal

The quality and impact of your web site determines your 'presence' on the web along with your popularity and relative position in the search engines. What does this mean in real terms? It means that a 'corner shop' in the real-world can become a superstore on the web or vice-versa if that is what is required. Just take a random surf around the web comparing well known giants such as IBM, General Motors, Smith-Klein Beecham etc with a handful of small players. In the web, everybody is created equal and it is up to you to build the appropriate image for your business.

Consideration 8 – Beware of ‘Over Glitzing’

There is always a temptation to use the latest animation technology and graphical whizbangs when creating a new website. However, it is vital to remember who your target audience is before embarking on this type of design strategy. Remember, you have no control over the viewing environment of your finished page for example: Internet Explorer, Netscape, NeoPlanet, Opera, WebTV, Linx etc. Even if your viewer has a common browser, there are no guarantees that it will be the latest revision and have all the ‘plug-ins’ required to support your amazing graphics show. If your viewer has a slow modem, they may not be prepared to wait for a large, animation heavy page to load. If you are dead set on glossy graphics and animation, then at least offer an alternative, lower bandwidth version of your site for those people not at the leading edge of web technology.

Consideration 9 – Encourage Feedback: Don’t be ‘faceless’

Many websites fail because they are faceless. By that, I mean that a cold, hard corporate exterior is displayed to the world that seems to have little or no humanity behind it. This is fine if you are producing a themed information only type site, but if you wish to encourage people to buy your product or service, then you need to encourage feedback. Not only must you encourage feedback, you must respond to it in a timely way. A new visitor to your site who registers a query should receive a real response in as short a time as possible. Very often, obviously automated responses serve only to annoy visitors. The ideal would be to turn around e-mail queries within hours – this gives your visitors the impression of a large and responsive organisation. NEVER EVER ignore e-mails. You will be very unlikely to transact any business with a snubbed visitor! DO encourage feedback at every opportunity and provide the option to join mailing lists that allow you to keep in touch with your customers in a ‘push’ (active) way.

Consideration 10 – Don’t Underestimate the Task Ahead

The World Wide Web provides a new and tremendous marketing opportunity for everybody. Here at The Digital Forge we believe that the web will replace television within the next 10 years as the primary interface between companies and their customers. Being hugely inexpensive in comparison to tradition marketing media such as TV, radio and newsprint, an opportunity is created for small enterprises to compete on equal terms with large organisations. In fact, we believe the web is so important that companies should seriously consider appointing a ‘Director of Internet Marketing’ or a ‘CIO’ (Chief Internet Officer). If your budget does not run to that currently, then appoint The Digital Forge to manage your Internet presence. Call us now or visit our website at <http://www.thedigitalforge.com> for more detail or complete the following questionnaire and fax it to us on +44 (0)1556 640109 or +44 (0)7446 953000.



New Website Project Initial Questionnaire

Your name

Company name

Address

Phone

Fax

Your e-mail

Do you have an existing domain name?

Yes/No

>>>>>

If NO, what domain name reqd?

Would you like us to register this name for you?

Yes/No

What is the title of your proposed site?

What is the site goal?

(I.e. Is it an information site, product sales site, corporate awareness, club membership, non-profit etc.)

Do you have a 'corporate' colour scheme?

Yes/No

Corporate Logo?

Yes/No

If YES to either of the above, please supply samples or PANTONE references for corp. colours. Please supply logo sample.

Do you already have a 'host' for your web site?

Yes/No

>>>>>

Who?

If NO, we can arrange this for you

Do you intend to collect sensitive information from your web site?

I.e. credit card numbers, address or telephone numbers

Do you wish to run an interactive 'bulletin' or notice board?

This is not always appropriate since it requires regular checking to maintain suitability

Do you wish to offer a real-time 'chat' facility?

Do you wish to generate revenue from your site?

Would you re-invest any revenue back into marketing your site?

Do you wish to invest in additional site marketing?

How frequently do you anticipate updating your site information?

What 'key' words or phrases best describe what your site offers? (No more than 10)

Will there be someone available to respond to e-mail requests?

Do you wish to track your visitors for marketing purposes?

Do you wish to maintain a mailing list for follow-up with visitors?

If YES, with what frequency will you send out mailings?

Every

days/weeks/months

What do you see as being unique about your site?

Do you have any other comments, ideas or suggestions at this stage?

Content Summary

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