

Eight Questions that Will Help You Plan a Great Web Site!



The internet is filled with endless opportunity for businesses. Today, most forward thinking managers and business owners realize that they must have some form of online presence. This is usually the catalyst for the development of a company Web site. Organizations generally have two choices when developing a site. Either a company will have their Web site designed “in-house” or they may choose to outsource. The internet is littered with a large number of cluttered, slow loading, ugly or ineffective Web sites. Many business Web sites seem to be displaying the same common mistakes. We will cover some helpful questions you should ask in order to avoid making some of these mistakes.

1. What is the purpose of your Web site?

There can be many reasons for the development of a Web site. A company may wish to generate revenue by selling products or services using the internet. Sometimes, organizations will seek to collect information about their customers using the web. Other times, a business may simply want a web “presence.” The reasons for starting a Web site can be numerous. However, there is one thing that all companies should consider before developing a Web site. All organizations need to identify the ultimate purpose or goal of their site. In many cases, there will be multiple functions that a Web site will serve. These functions may include marketing, eCommerce, education/training, customer service, entertainment, data collection, community building...and the list goes on. No matter what your case may be, the first step is to identify all the short-term and the long-term goals you would like your Web site to accomplish.

2. What are the demographic characteristics of visitors to your Web site?

A Web site is just like any other communication tool. It must be created to meet the specific needs of the intended audience or end user. Oftentimes a Web site will be created to serve multiple users. Therefore, before a company starts the actual development of a Web site, it should identify all the potential end users. Potential users can include people who purchase your products/services, those who use your product or service, internal employees, potential employees, vendors and strategic partners. Other considerations may include whether a user will be accessing the site from home or via a “hand held” device such as a PDA or cellular phone.

3. What is your competition/industry doing on the internet?

It is always wise to investigate the competition before launching any new product, service or marketing initiative. A thorough competitive analysis can help companies identify unique advantages and help with competitive positioning. An analysis of your competitors' Web sites can be extremely useful. This process will help you get a feel for where the bar has been set in relation to your users' expectation of their web experience. This web-based research will help a company determine what services, features, tools and information should be provided. Business success requires meeting your customer's needs better than the competition.

4. What features would you like for your site?

The days of static web pages are quickly passing. Today, Web site capabilities are virtually limitless. Web pages are now highly interactive. They offer visitors a plethora of engaging, informative and entertaining experiences. If a company can dream it, chances are a web designer can build it. Web site design choices can include: streaming video, interactive animation, discussion boards, data collection forms, virtual tours, online gaming, eCommerce as well as many other options. The wonderful feature of Information Technology is you can do almost anything within a website and there are usually several ways to do it!

5. How frequently will the content of your Web site need to be changed?

Content management is usually one of those areas that companies rarely think about when developing their Web site. Content Management or (CM) is a set of processes and technologies that support the evolutionary life cycle of digital information. Content management includes anything involving changes made to a Web site's content. Web site maintenance and content management can be one of the most costly aspects of managing a web presence. There are many hidden pitfalls that must be considered including, lock-in, control of site elements, design flaws/foibles and the list goes on. It is important that you contract with a vendor that is both reputable and knowledgeable so that you can avoid becoming a victim. Make sure you are clear on what your company is paying for and what you will be receiving.

6. Will you provide written copy or will someone else need to write it?

Web sites are much more than just pictures, video, and vibrant splashes of color. They include large blocks of text that convey important messages to the site visitor. In the advertising world, we call this text "copy." This may seem very intuitive on the surface. However, many companies never consider how or where they will develop the copy for their Web site. It is common for organizations to overlook the fact that they will need large blocks of copy in digital form before completing their site. This can often delay the

design process and lead to stoppages in Web site development. Remember, good copy writing takes time and experience. The copy writing process should not be rushed. Consider what resources are already available that you can draw from.

7. How many visual resources do you have available?

Nearly every Web site includes photos in some form or fashion. Sometimes, the right photo can do more to improve a Web site than just great design alone. However, the inverse is also true. If you have a bad photo or image on your site, especially if it is a company logo or product photo, you can damage your company's credibility and lose customers. There are also practical concerns related to imagery. These concerns include file type choices, image resolution and photography sources. Ask yourself these questions. Do I have a store of photographs I will use? Would I like to use illustrations, videos or both? What will my source be for any needed pictures that I do not currently have?

8. What pages or sections will you need in your Web site design?

The basic layout of a Web site should follow a pattern of organization that makes it easy for search engines to index your site. In addition, a Web site that is well organized will be much easier to navigate. Unless your Web site is constructed with an arrangement that is both logical and clean, your efforts can be wasted and maintenance will be difficult. Outline your Web site layout and organize your content into a concept that satisfies the purpose of your site. Keep it simple. Be sure to start with an overall concept and work your way down through all the divisions you will need to communicate. Draw a layout diagram showing the basic divisions of your Web site (see figure 1). It does not have to be fancy, but it should reflect a pattern that will be followed throughout your site. Include all the main divisions and subdivisions. Be comprehensive. Remember, it is always best to plan ahead.

Figure 1.

