

Planning for a Successful Web Site

If you're planning a new web site, or overhauling an existing one, a well-formulated plan before you start is the best way to ensure that you end up with the web site you need.

The plan should include:

1. The goal or goals of your web site.
2. A definition of your target audience.
3. The "look" you envision for the web site.
4. The content you want on the web site.
5. The time you want the web site to be completed by.
6. Your budget.

Goal or Goals:

Why do you want a web site? What do you hope to accomplish with it? Some possibilities include:

- Raising your profile: enhancing your brand and image
- Attracting new clients
- Supporting current clients, for example, enabling them to view the status of a project, access forms, or pay bills online
- Knowledge sharing: educating clients or potential clients
- Selling a product or service on the site
- Internal communication
- Community building
- Entertainment

If you decide that your web site will have more than one goal, you might want to rank your goals from most to least important. This keeps everyone involved in the project focusing on the most important goal. It also provides a blueprint for how your web site can grow and develop over time if your budget does not permit all the goals to be met at once.

At this initial stage of your web project, also ask yourself:

How should this web site fit with other current promotional and marketing strategies?

And, what will success look like? What measure or measures will you use to decide if your web site is meeting the goal or goals you set for it?

Audience

Who is the primary audience for your web site? What other audiences might it have? What specific information are these people likely to be looking for when they come to your web site? What questions do your clients or prospects usually ask you when they call you or you meet with them?

For your web site to be successful, the design, content and language used should meet the requirements of the people you want to get your message to.

It is also a good idea to take technical details into account. For example, are you primarily addressing the public or other businesspeople? If you are targeting primarily businesspeople, who are likely to be using the internet with a fast broadband connection, it would be appropriate (though not necessary) to have a more graphics-intensive site.

Look

What do you want your web site to look like? Does your organization have a logo and set identity (colors, fonts etc.) that you want to maintain on the site? Do you have existing artwork – photos, items used in brochures and fliers – that could be used on the site? Will you need new graphics created?

Do you want your site to be professional, conservative, friendly, whimsical? What do you like in a web site? What do you hate?

Content

What sections and features do you want your web site to have?

Most business web sites have some or all of the following areas: company history, descriptions of services and/or products, client list, testimonials, case studies, staff bios, contact information, educational articles, a news section, frequently asked questions, job opportunities, online purchase of products and services, directions to the office, and customer service and support features.

The web sites of nonprofit organizations generally have some of the sections described above, but also have the following: descriptions of their programs and services, information on how to volunteer, and information on how to make a donation. Some accept donations online.

In addition, there are many interactive features you can provide:

- Forms, for example “Contact Us” or “Request for Proposal”
- Databases to store information that changes frequently

- A site search function
- Newsletter sign-up
- Video or audio content
- “Members-only,” “clients-only” or “employees-only” sections
- Web-based training
- Calendar of events and event registration
- Chat rooms and message boards
- Sales staff support tools
- Content to download

As you think about what content you would like on your web site, also give some thought to where the material will come from. Inventory the content you already have in printed brochures, flyers or newsletters, but keep in mind that writing for the web is different from writing for other media due both to the “quick scanning” habits of web users and also to the requirements of search engines. Often, print media must be rewritten for the web. Decide who will write or rewrite the needed material – you, a staff member, your web designer’s copywriter?

Additionally, as you think about both the “look and feel” and the content of your web site, it is a good idea to spend some time looking at the web sites of your major competitors. How do these sites look? What content and functional features do they contain? Which elements of these sites should your site match, exceed or avoid? Might it be important to visually distinguish your site from a competitor’s?

Time

When do you want your web site launched? Allow enough time to assemble the content and to construct the web site if you are working towards a publicized launch date.

Budget

Make a budget for your web site. Web projects entail fees that are either one-time or recurring:

- **Domain Name Registration** (*recurring*): It's more professional to have your own domain name (yourcompany.com) than to use the free domain name supplied by a hosting company (geocities.com/yourcompany). Network Solutions (www.networksolutions.com), one of the original domain name registrars, charges approximately \$35/year (with discounts if you register for more than one year) to reserve a domain name. GoDaddy is also reputable and easy to work with.
- **Hosting** (*recurring*): Hosting fees vary depending on your needs. Basic, reliable hosting runs \$10 to \$25/month. If you have e-commerce requirements, or special needs, fees climb quickly.
- **Web Site Design** (*one-time*): The cost of building your web site depends on the complexity of the site. You can expect a quality web site custom-designed for your business or organization to run from one to several thousand dollars, depending on the size of the site and the functionality involved. A quality site that involved e-commerce with databases for inventory and on-line transactions will start around five thousand and often go much higher depending on size and requirements.

Make sure your web design company provides clear documentation of what is and is not included in the scope of your project. If your budget is limited, one option is to build the site in stages. It's better to have an outstanding small site and add sections and pages as needed in the future.

- **Marketing** (*recurring*): This always includes site submission to search engines, directories and industry-specific directories. It can include paid search engine listings, reciprocal linking with other web sites, and offline print or other media ads. You'll also want to reprint your business cards and stationery to include your web site address. Pricing and deliverables vary.
- **Maintenance** (*recurring*): How often will your web site need to be updated? Will some sections require more frequent updating? Would you like to handle the updates yourself or would you rather outsource this job? Web design companies generally charge hourly fees or have maintenance plans that allow for a specified amount of change at a reduced hourly rate.