

Websites: Make Your Website A Growth Engine

Work with a reliable web-design company that can help you meet current and future needs.

By Michel Ann Sharritt

People are often in a rush to get something, anything, up on the Internet. Because the average business owner is inexperienced at web design and related terminology, website companies anxious to make a buck slam something up on the Internet that may or may not work.

Also, some business owners mistakenly believe they can save money by creating a website on their own by using free software found on the Internet. Wrong. You'll spend money to compensate for the mistakes the free software makes. You have to understand: It's free for a reason -- it doesn't cover many areas of web design.

So, it's important to consult a web-design company. However, do a background check before you sign a contract. Check out their previous work; ask for testimonials; ask for phone numbers of previous customers and listen carefully to what they say.

To ensure you're working with an experienced person or company, ask for a sitemap and wireframe with your proposal. Anyone who can't provide this information lacks usability expertise.

Sitemaps are diagrams that group a website's pages into the hierarchy that will eventually become the structure and navigation of the website. A sitemap is a visual or textually organized model of website content that allows users to navigate through the site to find information. Think of a traditional map that helps you find places, but a site map goes the extra step by linking each listed item directly to its website counterpart.

Well-designed and organized sitemaps allow for scalability (growth) by intelligently designing information. In other words, the website should always be designed with future growth in mind, which can be accomplished through a well-ordered hierarchy, as represented in the sitemap. A good web-design company pays very close attention to detail so that information is logically organized, which the site's end-users see as clearly defined and labeled navigation on a website.

Wireframes indicate to prospective clients a webpage's visual design; they lay out how content will be organized on the page for the end-users. A wireframe, a visualization tool, presents proposed website functions, structure and content. It distinguishes the site's graphic elements from functional ones; it makes it easy to see how users will interact with the site.

A typical wireframe includes: key page elements and their locations, such as headers, footers, navigation, content objects and branding elements; grouping of elements, such as sidebars, navigation bars and content areas; labeling, page title, navigation links and headings to content objects; and placeholders, content text and images.

A reliable web-design company continually considers the needs of all website stakeholders (all potential groups that will use the site) and checks that they can fulfill their needs easily by using the site. For example, a school's website might have different information for students, teachers, parents, investors, etc., and each of those groups should be able to locate information that fulfills their goals in an easy, efficient manner.

Another web-design tool, an advanced usability test, checks ease of use and functionality. A reliable web-design company will allow you to test your site and conduct remote tests, too. After the test, it will provide advice on how to decide what changes to make.

Delivering a sophisticated, aesthetically pleasing website helps create, for the content provider and the end user, a work of art that serves as a rock-solid core for future growth, where additional information and features can be added down the road without having to redesign the entire website.

Other helpful features

Many companies forget to integrate social media into their websites. Social media allows open communication and provides a way to exponentially increase communication channels. Also, blogs open up communication and establish you as an expert in your field. This allows potential customers to get to know you and your business, and build trust within your business. Many free platforms allow the business owner to have a fully functional blog.

For sign companies, many different website features can educate people about signs. A Flash show could depict examples of past work. Also, visual examples could border of the page that explains about signs. Adding a video that educates people about signs could dramatically increase traffic.

Most sign companies and small businesses use their online presence to stake their small claim on the seemingly unlimited Internet. The Internet grows by leaps and bounds daily. Several options can help businesses claim their share of business from Internet marketing; some must be purchased, and others that can be done for free.

Paid options include targeted advertising and ad placement, through services such as Google. For example, if a small business (say for example, an online hardware store) wants to sell products, it can pay Google to place targeted ads on relevant websites (for example, a webpage on home improvement). Google can help match the small business's products to the webpage where they're displayed. This requires well-written content, with appropriate keywords that describe those products or services, and the design of "landing pages," or the page your website visitors arrive at after having clicked on a link.

For example, if an ad is for hammers, clicks should be directed to a page specifically selling hammers rather than to the website's homepage. Landing pages make it easier for end-users to find what they're looking for (which means high relevancy -- they require fewer clicks to find what they want), and can be tracked and streamlined with services such as Google Analytics.

On the other hand, many free options can drive traffic to your website. Two free tools, Website Grader (www.websitegrader.com) and Website Validator (validator.w3.org), offer suggestions on improving your SEO score and tips on fixing errors on your website. Suggestions include creating a few keywords for your website, which can be embedded in meta tags, and should be unique for each page on the website. These keywords tell search engines what the page is about.

In more technical jargon, a meta tag is a special HTML tag that stores information about a webpage, but isn't displayed in a web browser. For example, meta tags provide information, such as what program created the page, a description of the page and keywords relevant to the page.

Also, keywords that appear frequently in headings and text on the webpage indicate to search engines page relevance to your readers. Sign-company owners should consider what search queries their clients would enter when looking for them, and make sure those words appear frequently on the website, in headings and verbiage, as well as in meta-tag descriptors (which are hidden from view but embedded in the code of webpage's for search engines). For example, a custom electric-sign company would insert such meta-tag descriptors as "channel letters," "LEDs," "custom," and "neon."

A content-management system (CMS) enables companies to edit their content internally, perhaps even without the need for a webmaster. For a small business owner, this might simplify changing the content on their website without having to pay someone to make minor updates.

However, additional systems can add extra complexity. You should carefully choose a CMS system that meets your current and future needs without overwhelming the person that ends up using it. Otherwise, that person will end up either not using it or using it marginally, which is a waste of time and money. In many cases, it's better to send minor updates to the web developer or website manager, and offload the complexity to somebody that better understands it.

Many companies like to collect a big check to develop a website, but are less eager to help out after it has launched. I advise clients to carefully choose a web-development company for the long-term – and also one that will make quick changes when needed.

Functionality

Particular browsers and users can turn off functionality, such as Flash or JavaScript, to disable the features and content associated with that technology. Some people are annoyed by the "glitz" and disable these technologies to ease their browsing experience. Embedding important content, such as the website's main navigation system (menu/buttons), in a technology such as Flash can cause these users to miss this content. If end users turn off Flash, and your website uses it to create the menu and buttons, they couldn't navigate the website.

Good designs should account for all users' needs, so the most important content is delivered according to standards that are supported (and tested) across various platforms and browsers, including those where particular features, such as Flash, are disabled.

On the daily level, the more frequently you update content, the better. Search engines like to see content updated roughly once a week to maintain frequent crawls. Of course, update frequency can vary, based on the nature of the website's goals: A news site should change content frequently, while other sites, such as an individual's personal home page that contains family photos, might not need to update as frequently, because SEO is less of a priority.

Also, a page should load instantly. People expect pages to come up within a couple of seconds of loading a website. Of course, this depends on the speed of their Internet connection. However web pages can be programmed to conserve bandwidth and reduce the size of transferred data, such as images. A good web-design company takes special care when compressing images to retain quality, and use dynamic styles that can be drawn by the browser to reduce the number and size of images that need to be transferred.

A simple add-on to a website is a hit counter. Hit counters can be set up to count 'unique' visitors, so the same person visiting the site only counts once (based on IP address). This information shows the effectiveness of marketing campaigns to draw new site visitors.

Furthermore, analytics tools measure how long people stay on your site and what pages they visit, and tally visits by geographic location. This can help put the pieces of the puzzle together to see exactly how effectively a campaign or advertisement brings in people, tracking where they go on the site, and for how long.

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