

# Thinking about a new website?

As a leading web design and hosting company we get approached by lots of small and medium sized businesses wanting to create their first website or perhaps upgrade an existing website or add some new features but aren't really sure what they want or what will work best for them. The purpose of this article is to try and help you give some early thought to your website (or its redesign) and hopefully means you'll avoid making frustrating or expensive mistakes.

"Measure twice, cut once" is an old saying which has been drummed into apprentice carpenters for many hundreds of years. And still we see doors that don't quite fit or wonky tables that need a beer mat to make them stable! This message though – basically do a bit of planning and thinking first - applies equally in the digital age. Sadly, we have lost count of the number of businesses who have come to us for advice after having made expensive mistakes with their first ventures into the online world. Businesses which have ended up with a website that cost them a lot more than they first imagined or with a site that simply doesn't do what they want it to do.

The approach we like to take to avoid clients wasting time and money is to suggest a bit of pre-planning using a three step check list. It's commonsense really but it's surprising what a big payoff just an hour or so sat down quietly thinking about what you really want to achieve can do to get a clear view of what you want.

So here are three steps that we think are important when planning your new website or redesigning your existing site.

## ***Step One***

What do you want your website to do? Sounds daft when you put it like that. "Of course I know what I want it to do!" But do you? Just a few minutes thinking about exactly what you want your website to deliver can really pay off. Some questions to get you started might be:

- Do I want a simple 'brochure' site where I give some basic information about my company? Information that probably doesn't change much or very often, or
- Do I want something more elaborate with lots of pages and regular updates of information on offers and events that might change every week or even every day?
- Do I want something all singing and dancing where I can show my stock, accommodation, pictures, etc and, importantly, be able to take orders and payments online?
- Do I want to have contact forms so that people can get in touch with specific questions or other enquiries? If so, what information do I want them to give me with their enquiry?

- Do I envisage the website growing as my company expands in the future?
- Who and where are my target audience? For example a local plumber will be aiming at people maybe within an hour of home base. An online retailer on the other hand should be thinking internationally, perhaps with multi language and multi currency support available.
- Would it be beneficial to use the website to boost my potential customer database, perhaps by asking visitors to sign up for email newsletters so I can keep them in touch with updates on new products, promotions and special offers?

Last Christmas online retailers had their best ever Christmas with sales rising by 14% at a time when high street sales fell by nearly 2%. In fact the worst Christmas for high street retail in 15 years. We believe that this is a simple indicator of how use of the web has become 'embedded' in the way consumers think and act. What's more it's clear that this trend of 'moving to the web' is even more marked if your customers are other businesses. The simple reality is that no business today – retailer, manufacturer or services company - can afford to ignore the online opportunities and a good quality website is the key to grabbing your share of both consumer and 'business to business' markets.

The clear implications of this in terms of planning a new site or redesigned site is that you really should be thinking of allowing for significant growth over the next few years. We have clients that now take more than 50% of orders and enquiries online from a position where they took zero 18 months ago!

The simple fact is that very quickly the website will become vital to your business and it's very likely that you will want to change your website far more frequently than you would ever have originally imagined. What you don't want to be faced with is a big bill from your web designer every time you want to make a simple change. To keep these ongoing costs low and to give you as much flexibility as possible for making your own changes, here at soVision we now include our own soCMS content management system with most of our website designs. A content management system is very simple really. It enables you as the website owner to make changes very simply using an editor not unlike your word processor or email writing program. It means that YOU can make changes simply, quickly and cheaply exactly when YOU want them. No waiting for the web designer to be back from holiday and no need to get the cheque book out either!

### ***Step Two***

How do you want your website to be organised? Again this sounds obvious but a little time spent with a blank sheet of paper and a pencil will quickly enable you to draw up a 'site map' that will be worth its weight in gold once you get down to talking to the web designer about actually creating your site.

- What sections will you need? Do you have more than one offering? A pub we worked with recently had their main pub, some fabulous guest bedrooms and a lovely food offering they wanted to promote. Each was worthy of a section on the website in its own right and this approach gave a nicely balanced structure to their new site.
- Do you want to offer a 'download area'— somewhere where visitors can view larger documents? For example we worked with a retailer to create a download area where product specifications, installation instructions and technical information are all stored as documents for visitors to download and print themselves at home.
- Do you want to offer a news page covering latest information or special offers or an email subscription?

Just a few minutes spent planning can help you structure your thoughts and ideas. Once you have this simple plan in your mind's eye our approach is to work with you to come up with what we call a 'wire frame diagram'. This basically just creates a checklist sketch plan of your key sections and pages and how they link up and will be joined together as cross references.

When we work with you we always try and bring a fresh pair of eyes to your website. Often you are too close to your business and you don't always think like a new customer visiting your website for the first time. We have lots of experience on this. It's often called the 'User Experience' perspective. You need to look at the site like a prospective customer NOT as someone who already knows your business inside out. The first time a customer lands on your website you have to assume that they know nothing about you. Equally, you don't want to dumb down so much that regular visitors feel patronised or alienated. So run your initial ideas past a friend or relative who doesn't know too much about what your business does. Does it make sense to them? Use them as a sounding board for your ideas. Getting this user experience bit right isn't easy and again it's something where you need to take advice from your web designer who should already have valuable experience of working with other similar businesses.

We recently worked with a hotel client and suggested a special download area where they could store all their wedding packages, menus and brochures. The client was spending a fortune on printing and postage often for just fairly general enquiries. Now they can guide potential clients to the download area where they can use a 'self service' option and print out all the brochures at home instantly. This saves a lot of money, saves time both for the hotel and the prospective customer and the hotel knows that when the customer rings they are a serious prospect and ready to talk about placing a booking. Just one example of where some advance planning can pay off with delivering your customer exactly the information they need, just when they want it, and at the same time lowering your overhead costs and increasing your efficiency by encouraging self service from your new website.

### **Step Three**

What do you want your website to look like? In some ways this is the trickiest thing of all and again a good web designer can turn a simple thought or idea into a neat visual that expresses exactly the 'look and feel' your aiming for for your site. You need to give your web designer some steer though so some questions to ask yourself here might be:

- Who are my customers? Young? Old? Crazy or conservative? An up-market country hotel will want a different 'look' than say a surfing shop or trendy city centre nightclub.
- What's my own brand image? Think about your present promotional material. Do you want the website to look similar to create a house style? Or is your new website an opportunity to try something new and capture a different market segment?
- Do I want to create links to other sites? News feeds, blogs, Facebook and the like? Do you want a clean quick download that will suit visitors no matter how slow or fast their broadband connection?
- Do I want multilingual versions? This could be important if you have overseas markets you could exploit by using the local lingo? For example our soCMS content management system supports multiple language formats as standard.
- Do I want video and pod cast type downloads?

Again a good web designer can help here. You should be able to give them an overview of your customers and your brand image and they should come up with maybe two or three alternative design ideas for you to choose from. Recently here at soVision we were asked to work with a 'heritage brand' who wanted to use their new website to create a more modern and up to date brand image whilst still retaining the core values of the company established over many years of trading. We offered three outline designs and the client was delighted with our ideas and was able to choose the perfect fit for what they wanted to achieve from their new site. Already it's paying dividends with new markets being opened up and very positive feedback from customers.

So there you have it! Three simple steps that should help you avoid mistakes and get your new website off to a flying start. Hopefully this will have prompted some new ideas which will really help you create a great new website that will win you new customers and create a positive experience for every visitor to your site.

For free, no obligation advice on how soVision can help you develop a winning website please feel free to contact us by email, or phone and we'll be really happy to talk you through what's involved.

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