

Web site Re-do 101

07/28/08

We are getting ready to re-do our website. It's been out there for a number of years, was pretty basic to begin with, and doesn't get us any traffic to speak of. What suggestions do you have, for things we should think about as we start this project?

At some point every few years, most websites reach the point of obsolescence. Too many added on pages, technology changes and shifts in company goals or customer base means it's time start fresh. Fortunately, unless your current website is totally broken, you have the luxury of time to build the new one.

Start your website project with 3 things: budget, timeframe and objectives. Think through needs for design, text, SEO, advertising, testing, ordering, to name a few. When you finish, have a plan for evaluation and maintenance. Remember that you may be able to cash flow some of the costs, as you're likely to be working on the project for several months. Interview potential vendors to get an education about what's out there, which is the point of the exercise in the budgeting phase.

Early on, decide on timeframe. How long do you want this website to last? How long can you take to get this website project completed? Remember that most people say they want the website project completed tomorrow and they want it to last forever. Neither of those answers

is realistic. Coordination and thinking things through in the design phase – plus future changes in technology – mean it will take time to complete and launch, and your website will have to be redone again, another few years down the road.

OK, let's talk about objectives for the website. Who do you want to reach? Is the site an online form of your business brochure? Or do you want people to place orders on it? Do you want to strike up conversations with potential buyers, talk with existing customers, and/or educate the marketplace about what you do?

Decide on the purpose of the website from the customer or prospect perspective. Ask yourself, how will my company maintain contact with visitors once they've visited the website? What will be the role of the website in getting and expanding business relations? Educating the marketplace? Positioning the company?

The first time you built your website you may have worked with one provider who did it all. And you may do the same thing this time. Or you may decide to split things up among a variety of vendors, to get specialists for the various areas of need. Think of assembling and managing a team for the website as a job similar to that of being a General Contractor. Someone has to manage the project. You can be

the project manager and hire the subs, or you can hire a company to manage the project and organize the subs for you.

A good designer is critical. The website is first and foremost a visual tool. You're going to need an overall look and feel that is complimentary to all other company designs, including business cards and letterhead. Some people say that the website layout is most similar to that of a newspaper, so you may want someone familiar with that type of layout.

When it comes to text on a website, less is generally more. Get your point across in as few words as possible. Use words your customers and prospects use, to increase their comfort level. A good writer can add perspective and edit what you have to say down to its essential elements.

Prepare for Search Engine Optimization to increase your presence on the web. Hiring an SEO firm in the design phase means less re-do when you're ready to launch. They can guide and inform the design and text of the website, for the purpose of SEO.

Plan a long term relationship with your SEO vendor. It can take 6 months to a year of work to raise your presence on the web. Select a firm that will educate and advise you as you work together.



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Ask your SEO vendor to make recommendations on both budget and goals for both organic search and advertising.

Expect to test what works, and what doesn't in terms of getting visitors to respond to your site. Don't expect to get it right day one. Have patience and a budget to support tests. If you're planning on customers ordering off the website, interview fulfillment vendors. Find out what they can do to make your life easier and more profitable.

Finally, think long term. How often will you re-work the website, and who will do it? How will future copy, design, ordering/fulfillment and SEO needs get coordinated? What budget will be available to support these efforts? Remember to protect your front end investment with an ongoing maintenance plan.

Looking for a good book? Try *Balanced Website Design: Optimizing Aesthetics, Usability and Purpose* by Dave Lawrence and Soheyla Tavakol.

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