

## **How to design a great website**

By Sean Sanborn

### **Why do you want a website?**

Before you even begin you need to ask yourself why you want a website? And once you have it, then what? Do you want people to visit you often to read new information? Who is your target audience? You need to ask yourself a lot of pointed questions. Will this website:

- Make money? (Sell a product or an idea)
- Advertise a business/ Promote your ministry concept?
- Raise finances for a church, ministry or NGO?
- Help potential visitors locate you?
- Help volunteers find you to work with you?
- Inform members about activities?
- Provide full interaction amongst members, employees, visitors?

### **Your Own Domain Name**

One of the first big decisions to make is, "will you have your own domain name?" To help you decide, here are some popular reasons that influence most people to choose to get one.

- Professional: Increase your credibility with your visitors or customers. People will trust that you have existed for a while, will continue to exist, and will be around if they need to contact you. People are nervous about buying products from snake-oil-salesmen who close their company immediately after selling you a defective product.
- Advertisement: A domain name is a simple way to "advertise" your site. It is an important part of branding. Some URL's are more easy to remember than others so choose wisely.
- Portable. If you ever make any changes, such as change your hosting services then you won't loose everything. People can still find you without their bookmarks ever needing to change.
- SEO- Search Engine Optimization: If you want people to visit your site then you need to compete with search engine ranking. Having your own domain name will go a long way to increasing your visibility by search engines.

## What to say

What information will you put on your site? You could create a beautiful design but if you have nothing to say then it would clearly be a pointless waste of time. Before you even begin writing, consider that writing for the web is very different than writing in other contexts. Your visitors aren't looking for the next great novel. They want information and they want it fast. They are tired, impatient, and skeptical. On average they will grant you 10 seconds to grab their attention with your design. If you succeed then they will grant you 55 seconds to figure out what makes you unique. The typical visitor will only read about 20% of what you've written on your webpage. So when writing you will need to do the following:

### Writing

- Write short and concise sentences and use simple vocabulary
- Say what you mean, especially with you headings and subheadings. Don't be overly creative
- Credibility: Never exaggerate or use embellished claims.
- Put important information at the top. Use a consistent visual hierarchy. Intro. Body. Conclusion. Use action prompting words (free, sale, try now, ...)
- Testimonials
- Research/proof from experts
- Persuade and then back-off
- Inspirational, food for thought.
  - State a bold challenging statement
  - Explain a paradox
  - Ask a question

### Style

- Use bold, color or other subtle techniques to get visitors to look at keywords that you want to highlight or stress.
- Most visitors prefer sans-serif fonts like Verdana or Arial.
- Use bulleted lists.

For more ideas check out: <http://websitesitips.com/webcontent/>  
Once you have written out the text for your site. Then you are ready to go on to the next phase. Don't ask for someone to design a website for you without having written most of the text.

## **Search Engines Optimization (SEO)**

Search engines are your allies. Do not upset them. You just read about how to keep your visitors happy, well, keeping the Search Engines happy is even more important because without them you would probably never even have any visitors.

### **Keywords**

Information-rich words

Simple, easy to understand words

Power words/Targeted words

### **Title and description**

- Your title should be around 15-20 words and your description needs to be less than 200 characters.
- Squeeze in as many of your most important keywords as you can on your title, your meta-description and of course on your pages. Especially your gateway pages.
- Think of creative ways to get your title and description to capture visitor's interest. Put yourself in their shoes.

### **Design concept**

Now you need to decide how it's all going to look. Look at other websites that are doing something similar and tell us your favorite 3-5 websites and tell us why you like them. Next we will need to come up with a color scheme. We will create whatever you ask, even if it is black with orange polka dots and purple stripes, but please don't do that to us. Optimally, as we work together, we will be able to come up with a page that is warm, inviting and professional. We are looking for soft colors that match nicely and a layout that is uncluttered, well organized, and properly aligned. The key here is to create a feeling of what ever it is you want to say. This feeling should let your visitors know exactly what you are about before they have even read one word of your site.

A visitor should instantly know nearly all they need to know about what you are providing. Also make sure that they can find your contact information easily. Think carefully about what you plan to reveal because the whole world will be able to access it. We would suggest that you do not use your personal email address.

**Make your site "sticky"**

People visited your site for a purpose and will not usually wait around to be entertained. The speed in which your page loads is very important. Therefore, do not make your site top-heavy with multimedia like flash. Keep in mind that some of your visitors are still using dialup. Think very carefully about what kind of visitor or customer you want on your site. You don't want millions of hits a day with no click-thru's just because you used the words "FREE CASH MONEY INSTANTLY!" What you want is focused hits from people who will actually be interested in what you have to offer. Your home page needs to very clearly show what you are offering and how it can benefit someone. The feeling of your site should appeal to that primary target group. You want a website that is "sticky" meaning that people will come and stay on your site and even come back. The first glance of a visitors eyes is the most important and statistically they are going to look up the top left corner of your page, so put something important up there even if it is only your logo. Keep in mind that many of your visitors will not even scroll down to read the whole page unless you have convinced them to stay. Keep the really important stuff up top and easy to find.

### **Blogging: "Content makes a website sticky"**

You should seriously consider writing a blog. Here you can share details about those things that you are passionate about. Already, you are so passionate about something that you have created a website. If you are passionate about what you do then your visitors will be able to catch your enthusiasm and feel compelled to respond to what you are offering. Make sure you keep adding to your blog. Writing relevant articles will keep your website fresh. If your site is inaccurate or not up-to-date then people will loose trust in you.

Once your visitor has read the interesting and informative things that you have to say, then what? You need to compel your visitor to do something. Your reader is not passive but an interactive participant. You need to help them to decide to make a choice about what they have read and inspire them to let their money speak for them. Do they care about the plight of an orphan? Then allow them to donate to that child. Do they like the look or usage of your product? Then ask them to buy it right now. Even getting them to "Join" is an important forward step.

## **Conceptual Layout**

Next we need to get down to the nitty-gritty's. Your site layout is very important and requires lots of combined effort. We are looking for streamlined and easy access to your site. Your visitors are not there just to look at your pictures, they are there for a specific reason and they should be able to find what they are looking for with only one or 2 clicks (unless your site is huge). This is why it is wise to push some things in their direction, but not too much. If you push too many things then your page will be cluttered and your visitors will leave in frustration. A Systems Analyst would be a helpful person to bring on board at this point to help you stay focused on what is pertinent. You should consider providing a site-map to cut through the confusion. Note: make sure your site-map is up to date or you will loose frustrated visitors quickly. Also consider using a free site search engine like google.

## **Menu Navigation**

The navigation of a website is incredibly important. If visitors have a hard time finding what they are looking for then they are just going to leave. As a rule of thumb, a menu should be 3-8 top-level buttons with submenu's no more then 8 deep. Keep thinking about what ideas and concepts can go together. Trim the fat. Keep every page consistent. Put your menu on the top or on the left. Don't be overly creative here. Your menu should be easy to find and use.

If you are going to sell more than 30 products then you are going to need to start thinking about using a database. It may be time consuming to get it going but it will eventually be well worth the effort.

## **Click Through Action Buttons**

Instead of letting visitors go where they think they want to go, it is usually optimal to try to guide them on a pre-selected path where you want for them to go. Instead of a large complicated menu it is usually wiser to guide visitors specifically to those area that you want them to go. By giving them action buttons you can control what they see and ultimately what they will purchase. Don't hide the information that your visitor wants until later in the process just to "hook" them. For instance, don't hide the price until the end or they will never reach the end. You will wind up not "hooking" anyone. People want the bottom-line before they are willing to take their time to continue looking

further.

### **Menu Wording**

How are you going to word your menu selections? The words should be common English usage that is clear and communicative (Use 2 words if one doesn't convey enough information). For instance, if you want to offer English Classes then please say just that, If you were to merely write the word English then someone could assume a myriad of other possibilities. Consider, in advance, if your site will eventually be viewed in another language and how well that word will translate.

### **Creative Naming**

Have fun with it and give it your own creative touch. For instance one menu system that I worked on was for a musical and so the menu consisted of (Home, The Legend, The Team, The Music, Cinema, Gallery, Box Office, Gift Shop) Notice how these words make you feel like you are in a theater. Instead of saying "Purchase your Ticket" I wrote "Box Office" and the visitor still knows what is meant. Instead of Buy our Merchandise, I wrote "Gift Shop." This can help to give your visitors a themed and unique experience.

### **Size and content management systems**

Another important decision to make early on is how big do you intend your site to become?

Will you have more than 100 pages accessible from a top level menu? If so then you will probably want to consider a content management system. There are lots of useful and free options available out there. Wordpress is a useful and free tool if you will primarily be blogging. Joomla is a little more advanced for people with some training and knowledge. There is Zen Cart for an online marketplace. You can even mix and match, but get some advice and really look at your options before moving ahead. For instance, you could use a Joomla template for your main site and Wordpress for your blogging. If you go this route make sure that each page looks like part of the same themed community of pages. For a little bit of money you can purchase a pre-designed template. It is usually well worth the money. The great part of this is that someone else handles the programming and usually offers improvements for future updates such as the changeover to HTML 5. In this way you wouldn't even need to worry about how to generate a menu.

## **Traditional web design**

If you want full power and creativity over your site design then you will need more than just a Content Management System.

## **Photoshop Design**

Design a visually appealing site in Photoshop. (Or have a designer do it for you). Name your file with a significant keyword because your graphical slices will be named after this file. Make sure the width is not going to be wider than what can be viewed by people with small screens. Consider which areas the text will go, the footer, the pull-down menu, search area, etc... You can get some great pre-designed PSD templates out there and then you just need to tinker with it for your site. I like to create a fun entry page and then have the other pages have a reduced graphical usage of that first entry page. On the first page there will be eye-grabbers to get a person into the site. This will mean 2 separate template files in a program like Dreamweaver. Once it is ready, create page slices. Make one slice for each conceptual area. Don't make too many slices. Keep in mind if your design changes, your slices need to change too. Now save "for web browsers."

## **Dreamweaver or other HTML editor**

*I mean a real editor-not code heavy editors like iWeb or Frontpage  
This next bit is a refresher for people who already know how to do this stuff.*

- Create a directory called yourddomain.com (spell it exactly the same as your domain name.)
- Copy your html and JPG files over.
- Set your HTML editor to recognize your new site.
- Save the new Photoshop HTML as a template file.
- Create your index.html.
- Import menu as library item.
- Don't forget to make library files for other sections like the footer with "date site last updated."
- Make sure you spend plenty of time on the Meta tags.
- Make sure every page has standardized CSS formatting.
- FTP site over.
- Test all links online.

## **Menu**

Use a DHTML pulldown menu interface so that it won't be top heavy or potentially incompatible like java or Flash. If you use Flash you could be committing search-engine suicide, because search engines are not able to read this code. Your menu should be a key place to let the search engines know what you are truly about.

## **Finishing up**

- **Test:** Before posting the site it is good to go over it and verify that all your links work. Especially if you are linking to any other sites.
- **Check:** Next recheck the spelling and grammar.
- **Verify:** Recheck the accuracy of all the information such as contact information, products available for purchase, services performed, etc...
- **SEO:** Make sure that nothing on your site will upset any search engines. If they turn against you, then you will practically cease to exist on the web. Do not try to trick the search engines. Instead, bend with the way they function.