

## **ORGANIZING YOUR WEB DEVELOPMENT PROJECT**

Are you considering taking your brick and mortar business online? Do you have a product or service that seems ready-made to be sold on the Internet? Or perhaps you would like to spread your message to a larger audience and feel that a Web site is now the best way to market.

There are lots of other reasons to take your product, service, or information online, but one thing is clear: you are ready to start your Web development project. Congratulations on taking this step! Being online is one of the fastest ways to instantly market to an entirely new and obtainable audience. If you are ready to go online, however, you'll need to take the time to carefully plan and organize the specifics before creating your site. The more you plan in advance, the more time, money, and effort you will save as you go forward with your project. A Web site is a key element in your marketing plan and, depending on your product and your site, can generate thousands of dollars for you business. Conversely, without appropriate planning, your site could cost you a lot of unnecessary money and end up with very little in terms of traffic or return on investment.

What exactly do you need to organize your Web project? This article will outline some of the key elements that businesses and entrepreneurs should consider before beginning the search for a Web design or development firm.

### **BUDGET AND TIMING**

One of the things that always surprises me as a Web developer is that some client prospects have no concept of a budget for their project or of a realistic timeline for the development of a Web site. Part of their confusion is that they are unsure what such a project typically costs. In addition to graphic design and programming, a Web site requires annual domain name registration, which is normally only a few dollars a year, and a Web hosting service to house your files. Hosting services begin at a few dollars per month up through \$100-150 or so per month, depending on your needs. On top of this, you may want to eventually hire a search engine optimization firm to help you market, research, and develop the best way to rank well in popular search engines. You may also want to hire a firm to write or develop content for your Web site. The reality is that the cost to create a Web site can run from free to tens of thousands of dollars.

Now I know you're thinking, "Whoa! How can I decide on a budget if the range is so wide?" Determining funding for a Web project, however, is no different than determining funding for your company's hardware requirements, or a budget for office supplies. There are two ways to approach this. First, you can determine what your dream Web site would offer and research pricing from there. The problem with this approach is that clients often end up desiring a site that is well outside of their budget. If, for example, you like a popular site like Nike.com and want something similar, you should keep in mind that Nike most likely had an extremely high end budget. The upside, however, is that you will learn exactly what the value of various Web site components are.

The other way to approach a Web budget is to come up with a figure after doing some pricing research and then decide what you want to get for that price. You would need to know what you absolutely require from your Web site and then, if there are additional resources remaining, you can add bells and whistles such as Flash productions or video.

If you use this method and determine that you cannot get what you need or want within your available budget and cannot increase your budget at the moment, you can use scheduling to ease the burden of costs. For example, if you have a limited budget, perhaps you can start with an affordable “brochure” or template Web site and use that to get your product online quickly. A brochure site is just a page or a few pages with information and contact points so that people can learn about your product. Template Web sites are often very cost effective, but may have a cookie cutter look to them. Many hosting or template companies offer template sites that they will also host for you for a monthly or annual fee. Again, these fees can vary widely, so you will need to research cost effective solutions. Getting online immediately would then be “Phase I” of your project. As your business grows, your Web development budget will grow and you can schedule additional phases to fit in with your growing online needs, such as custom design, login capabilities, and e-commerce.

In addition to budget allocation, creating a timeline for the development of your site is critical for your prospective programmers so that they can schedule and estimate the job properly. This too will affect budgeting, as some projects will be deemed as “rush jobs” and will incur additional fees. Also, custom programming will take more time than an out-of-box solution. For example, if you need to set up an intranet that manages your firm’s human resource department and had only a few months to go live, an existing solution would be more likely to meet your deadline than a custom design.

Obviously, budget and timing concerns are going to determine and affect what sorts of services and tools you can offer site visitors. However, before considering what you would like to offer visitors, you should first determine the purpose of your Web site.

### DETERMINING YOUR WEB SITE’S PURPOSES

Companies create Web sites for a large variety of purposes. Some companies want a simple brochure site, others want a very dynamic, interactive site to sell products or offer downloads. Some companies are looking for a secure internal site just for their employees; others want to offer clients a safe area where can view their account information. Some companies are looking to expand their business out of their local area; others feel it is just a necessary tool for keeping up with their competition. Whatever the reason, it is crucial that you consider all the ways a Web site can benefit your company. This will help you understand the size of your project, target your budget resources appropriately, and determine how much outside help you will need.

A good way to analyze your site’s purpose is to think about it from your visitor’s point of view. What is the ultimate goal you want your visitor to accomplish while using your site? Do you want them to purchase a product or contact you to discuss services? Do you want them to compare your rates with your competitor’s rates? Do you want them to

download certain information or articles for free? Whatever is the ultimate task you want your visitors to perform, you should consider this first when thinking about your site's purpose.

In determining purpose, you should also consider both the long-term and short-term value of your site. Let's say that I've decided to run for mayor and I want to create a site, BadalatyForMayor.com. Obviously, this site is going to be very short-term. (If I win, I will want a different domain name and a whole new site.) So my objectives will be to get the site launched as quickly as possible, my budget will most likely be fixed and limited, and my purpose is twofold: to get as many people in my town familiar with me and then to get them to vote for me. I would need very highly targeted search engine optimization techniques employed immediately. I may want to add a blog (an online journal) or local news feed. I would not need any other bells and whistles as long as I've found a way to reach local voters.

On the other hand, my Web site could exist for the long-term or indefinitely. I want to sell some books I've written on Web design. I've only published two books, but I plan on publishing one book every six months. My short-term purpose will be to get customers to buy my books. My long-term planning would need to allow for adding books to my shopping cart system, but I might also want to expand my product line as time goes on. Perhaps I will offer training videos and will want to demonstrate a sample online. Or, perhaps I will create an affiliate program where other companies can sell my books for a commission. I can also choose to market other similar books, and turn my small online site into a bookstore focusing on Internet training products. My developer will need to have an idea of this future expansion when planning the software tools and programming for the site.

Think of your overall Web site purpose (i.e., selling my product, getting your vote) and then think of smaller, secondary level purposes (such as improving service with customer feedback or informing people about issues). Both are critical in developing a focused purpose for your Web site. Once you have discovered your chosen purposes and fit them in with your budget and timeline, you will need to select the tools appropriate for your project.

### SELECTING EFFECTIVE TOOLS FOR YOUR WEB SITE

Tools are the things that make your site attract return visitors. They can be anything from a shopping cart to a newsletter or a blog. You should start with the tools that are necessary for your site. When selecting tools, you need to be aware of all the requirements (licensing, legal restrictions, etc.) of anything you integrate into your site. For example, if you are going to be selling retail products online, you will need a shopping cart and a payment gateway. You'll need to select and integrate with shipping companies, if your product is tangible. You'll probably want to consider sales, promotions, and special offers. Security will be critical to safeguard your clients' financial information. A developer will possibly be required if you are not comfortable installing and customizing the required software yourself. Remember that you will

probably want the cart to have a look and feel that is compatible with the graphic design of the rest of your site and this will take a bit of programming.

When selecting additional tools, you need to think in terms of what clients and/or visitors will get from your site. The more you can offer them, the more they will keep coming back. Of course, there is a fine line to walk here. You don't want to bombard visitors with too many options because you want to drive them back to your main purpose.

Perhaps you would like to create a newsletter and allow visitors to sign up for it. In that case, you would either have to integrate newsletter software, or hire a third party newsletter company such as Constant Contact. You have to keep in mind anti-spam laws, and make sure that your newsletter does not violate them. Or, maybe you have a very specialized request that you have not seen before online. In that case, you may need to hire a development firm to design a custom program to run on your site. Are you interested in running video or podcasts on your site? All of these options will depend on what you want to offer visitors, your defined purposes, and on your budget.

Integrating any sort of software may require a licensing fee. There are all sorts of software that is free to utilize, but many of them come with little or no support. Many hosting companies come with much of this functionality integrated into their plans, and you will only need to set up a database and perform a "one click" install to get started. Keep in mind that if you have little or no programming skills, this can be difficult to set up and customize.

Another thing you will need to consider is what sort of programming language you would like to use for your system. Some programming languages require a Windows host service, some require a UNIX host service, and some programs can run on both but are preferable to run on one of these choices. A Windows or UNIX host has nothing to do with the sort of system you are running on your own computers, but on which system your hosting server utilizes. It does affect pricing. Windows plans tend to be a little more costly, as do the programming languages for Windows (such as ColdFusion). Windows programming is considered by some to be more robust or secure than Unix-compatible programming, such as PHP. This is a debatable area, so it's best if you ask for recommendations from experienced developers and from other business owners.

Once you have researched the tools that you would like to incorporate into your Web site, you should move on to thinking about how many visitors your site will attract, now and in the future.

#### DETERMINING SITE SIZE AND GROWTH

This may be difficult to gage when you are first starting out, but in order to appropriately select a host, you need to have some idea of how many people will be using your site and what they will be doing on that site. Will they be downloading products? Will they be streaming video? Will they be uploading images to your site? Will it be a hundred visitors per month, or are you expecting tens of thousands? This will affect bandwidth,

which is the amount of data transfer and storage you will be using on your Web host's server.

If you are delaying more advanced features for the time being, you should consider how your tools will grow when selecting a host. Hosting packages provide a limited amount of bandwidth and transfer capability and will penalize you with fees and possibly cut you off if you go over your plan. Always carefully read their Terms of Service and find out what the overage charges are, or if you can keep one plan and add more capacity to it later on. You can of course upgrade to a larger plan in the future as well, generally for a small fee.

You'll also need to revisit your long-term purposes and think about future site growth. Just like writing a business plan, it's effective to think in terms of one-year, two-year, and 5-year growth goals for your Web site. Or, in the case of a specific short term site, think about what you want to accomplish in terms of months. How large should your visitor base grow by that time?

Speaking of visitors, who exactly do you want to be visiting your site? The next step in organizing your Web site is to discover your target audience.

#### WHO IS YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE?

Determining the composition of your target market is crucial in planning your Web site. Effectively driving traffic to your site can only be accomplished when you discover the demographics of potential site visitors. You already know the purpose of your site. Keeping this in mind, who will be likely to use the product and services that you are offering online? How do they buy things or access services like yours? Will they pay for information or subscriptions, or do they prefer free services? How often are they online, and what do they expect from a site like yours? How often do you expect them to visit your site, and why?

It's useful as well to consider their psychological makeup, or their psychographics: Creative or methodical? Energetic or complacent? Rebellious or conservative? Carefully considering your audience will allow you to choose the appropriate tools and means of drawing them back to your site. It will also help your developer create a site compatible with your regular audience's technology. It will assist you in keyword development when you are ready for search engine optimization, if you require it. You may want to consider design which is "accessible", that is, design which is usable by as many people as possible, including those who are vision-impaired and use screen readers for Web surfing.

You also need to consider your target market with regard to their level of technology knowledge, computer savvy, and Internet usage. What sort of systems do they use? Are they a cutting edge audience, with the latest technology at their fingertips, or are they new to computers? Are they more likely to have a Mac or a PC?

Properly gaging the makeup of your audience will allow you to attract them by creating a theme suited for their needs.

### YOUR SITE'S THEME

After considering your site's purpose and your target market, develop a theme to project your central message to your audience. Your site may have many things to say about your business, which is helpful for search engine positioning, but having one main theme will ease your pre-design planning, unify your Web site as a whole, and help you develop your search engine keywords. A single centralized theme can also help you create and organize content for your site. In addition, a theme is critical in helping you to select an appropriate domain name that can better your odds with search engines. For example, the theme of this article might be "Web organization", which would be a very relevant domain name, if it were available.

As an example, let's say you are a Web designer. The main theme of your site would be that you design Web sites. How you design, what your experience is, pricing, contact information, other Web services you offer, articles, and your portfolio would be messages that are just as important to your audience but they all revolve around your main product. However, Web design is a pretty wide field. Any good marketer will tell you should narrow your niche to stand out from other Web designers. If you design Web sites primarily for people in the Poconos of Pennsylvania, you can now focus your theme towards that area. This change in the theme allows you to add some additional information. Perhaps you can list other technology services in the Poconos on your site, or post articles on how technology is one of the fastest growing industries in this area, or even offer discounts for local businesses. This of course will help with you when you get to developing your Web site marketing plan. You can target a very specific audience as well as broaden your site's reach. It will also supply more opportunities for additional page creation, which is helpful for search engine optimization.

A properly targeted theme will also effectively help you choose a compatible look and feel for your Web site.

### CREATING A DESIGN

Planning the graphic design is where all the above elements come together. Budget and scheduling will let you know how extravagant the design can be. The purpose will allow you to determine tools, which you must consider fitting into the design. Future considerations will allow you to determine if you want fresh design every so often, or a simpler look designed to last longer. You've done your demographics and psychological profile properly, now you will be able to decide what kind of look will suit your audience and promote your theme.

In terms of graphic design, color scheme is crucial. If you have an existing logo, your Web site has to complement that, but you also should consider the psychological factors of color meanings. For example, red is a very intense color, and can be linked to high energy, passion, or danger. If you soften it to pink, you have a very different emotional experience: romance, love, or feminine symbolism. You also need to be careful when

combining colors. Red, white and blue are great but do remind people of nationalistic colors (for the U.S. or the U.K.) or of holidays such as the Fourth of July. If your site has this type of theme, this color scheme might work for you. If not, you might want to step back and see what your color scheme may be saying to visitors.

When creating a design, you should always keep your site's purpose in mind. Design that is too busy or has too much motion or glaring colors will distract visitors from the real reason you want them there. That means that you should have enough white space on your site. Technically, white space is defined as the amount of blank area on your site. "White space" does not necessarily have to be white; it can also be whatever your background color is. Your image or product sections should be neat and organized logically. Web sites can be very taxing on the eyes, especially to people who use computers for most of the day, which is why so many professional sites use black text on a white background at least in the most important text areas. You want to make sure that your text sections are clear and not so lengthy or wordy that visitors lose interest. In addition, text should contrast against the background enough to be legible to your audience even if colors are used, and it needs to be of a size and font that will fit your audience's visual abilities as well.

It may seem tricky to organize the design in such a way that will fit all the content and elements you want to offer visitors and still be visually appealing, but there are many ways of achieving this cleanly and effectively. A good way of getting ideas for design and color scheme is by visiting other sites or by viewing colorful magazines, such as fashion or graphic design publications. A professional development team will be able to incorporate design inspired (but not copied) from other sources to create a unique site for you.

Compelling visuals that highlight rather outweigh your purpose will also work hand in hand with the actual organization and layout of your site.

### LAYOUT AND ARCHITECTURE

Before you can actually layout your pages, you need to organize sections, if your site is going to be larger than 10-15 pages. Again, you'll need to think in advance about how your site is going to grow. If you expect your site to grow dramatically, organizing topics so that you can have logical drop down menus or other types of menus even before you have too many pages will be a great help in the future. Once you've organized your data into topics, you can then put subtopics into place. For example, a top level "Company" menu might have submenus such as corporate history, bios, mission, company philosophy, and job openings. If you expect to be adding more categories in the future, you should discuss this with your developer so that he or she can create a site that allows you to expand your menus. For example, on my site, [www.artbytech.com](http://www.artbytech.com), the left-hand menus are intentionally designed to allow for expansion, for both top level and sub-level menus.

If you recall when we covered purpose, we talked about the ultimate goal you would like your site visitors to accomplish. If you organize your page layout with this in mind, you

can design your site to always give visitors the ability to get back to that goal. If your primary goal for them is to contact you, you should have a phone number, email, or a link to your contact form on every page. This goal would lend itself very well to a structure that has a footer section on every page. Your site could be designed to have unchanging footers from page to page.

In thinking about site layout, it's helpful to create a flowchart. On a large site, your developer may do this for you or together with you. It can sometimes be difficult to envision where and how you want all the elements laid out. You should visit other sites to see elements that inspire you and consider incorporating similar elements, in terms of layout and composition.

You will also want to go out and take a look to see what your competitors are offering on their Web sites.

### YOUR COMPETITION

To get an idea of where you should be headed with this project, it's helpful to look at your competitors and review their online presence. Remember that with Internet technology, you should be looking at global competitors as well if your target is not confined to a particular region.

Visit your competitors' sites. What are they offering that you should be? What are they not offering that you can set up as a value-added service on your site? What is the quality and professionalism of these sites, and does it match the target audience? Put yourself in the shoes of your prospective visitors and see how their sites measure up in terms of achieving their ultimate goals. Your site should be at least on par with the professional quality of your competitors, if not better. This does not necessarily mean that you need a pricey, high tech site; it simply means that your design has to be as clean and efficient.

Think about what you have come up with so far. Does it too closely resemble one or some of your competitors' sites? You want to stand out for the crowd, so if this is the result you see, go back to the niche you developed while creating your theme and see how you can change elements on your site to better draw attention to your unique capabilities.

Of course, researching competitors is just the start of your Web site marketing plan.

### MARKETING YOUR SITE

Even before your site is live, you should begin to plan or even start marketing it. You can create an offline campaign for your site, with special offers for the first visitors. You can order new business cards with your URL on it. You can run press releases to announce the launch date and the special features on your site. If you have something that none of your competitors offer, you should run an ad or marketing campaign to highlight that offer.

There are many online marketing options you can choose as well. Obviously, search engine optimization is a key element. To truly be effective in this area, you may want to hire a search engine optimization firm or a content development firm. They will be able to help you create keywords and content develop specifically for your target audience and purpose. Or, you could invest in a quality course or book on this topic and take on the work yourself. Here is where a lot of the research that you have already done will pay off. You know your business the best and this detailed knowledge will be critical in creating the right content.

You can also market your site by creating a blog or podcast about your product or service. Blogs and podcasts are a great way to get legitimate inbound links to your site from other sites and it will help boost your rankings. (Legitimate inbound linking can boost search engine rankings.) You can go to similar blogs and comment and publish links there as well to drive traffic.

One of the great things about the Internet is that it offers unlimited opportunities to write, teach, and advise online about your area of expertise. In addition to traditional advertising such as print or radio, there are new opportunities now like Internet radio and online talk shows. Joining online business and networking communities to promote your services and skills will not only help you network to your community, but can provide opportunities for teleseminars, online conferences, and e-book publishing. The possibilities are unlimited.

#### TEN SIMPLE QUESTIONS FOR ORGANIZING YOUR WEB SITE

Planning ahead will pay off a great deal in helping to create a site that has all the elements to draw an audience that will fulfill your purpose and drive them toward your ultimate goal for visitors. To start organizing your project, ask yourself the following questions:

1. *What is the budget and timeline for my Web project?*
2. *What are the purposes of my site?*
3. *What tools would I like my site to offer?*
4. *How large do I expect my site to grow?*
5. *Who is my target audience?*
6. *What is the main theme of my site?*
7. *What is the look and feel of my site?*
8. *How should I lay out my site?*
9. *Who is my online competition?*
10. *How will I market my site?*

Answering these questions in great detail will give you the best chance for return on your investment. It's perfectly fine to seek guidance on these questions. An expert opinion can be a great help, but remember that this is your project and you will ultimately need to be the one to define it.

If planning your Web site sounds a lot like planning your business, you're right. Taking your business or service online is almost like starting a new business. You can't invest too much time in organizing this project, but overlooking these details can hurt your new business. Use this article as a guide to think about the elements of your Web project and to plot them out carefully. When you see new business pouring in through your Web site, you'll be happy you did.