



Guide to Evaluating Your Website

The Internet provides you with an extremely powerful business tool. It enables you to communicate and interact with a global audience. It can be fun, useful, entertaining and a compelling means of getting your message across.

However a poorly designed website can harm your business and is ineffective as a marketing or business tool. The following are a few warning signs that will help you evaluate your website with suggestions for solutions.

Don't let your website be an embarrassment to your business.



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Look for these warning signs:

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Unclear objectives

Problem: Start with, 'we need a website' and jump right into, 'let's build one or get it built.' No purpose, plan or strategy.

Solutions: A web site is usually a complex project. To succeed it must have a specific purpose and objective. A plan that clearly marks out the path from start to finish is a standard requirement. The plan will require an allocation of resources, money, and time to achieve the objectives. Your Internet strategy must take into account your larger business goals as well as the specific online objectives, and implementation of the plan.

Lack of focus on the target audience

Problem: Lack of focus on the needs and requirements of your target audience can lead to a site without a focus. Ask yourself the questions - Who is your target audience? What is their profile? What are their needs and interests? Was your website built with the needs of the customers in mind or was it designed from a personal or management perspective? Not knowing your customer/audience invariably results in low interest or no interest, and certainly in zero sales.

Solutions: Since the objective of your website is to get a strong and effective message across to the company's customers and prospects, the orientation of the user must be paramount, and not of the design or development team. For example, a site meant for senior citizens should use large fonts, a site for children requires the use of simple language, a site for professionals should take into account the value of their time, their preference for directness and simplicity. A focus group of representative potential users is always helpful.

Treating your site as an technology exercise

Problem: Treating your website as an technology exercise rather than a marketing and communication tool for getting across the company's message. The Internet is a medium of communication and interaction. Technology is a tool and platform but is not the driving force.

Solution: Start with your objectives, your target audience and your message. Select and use the technologies that are appropriate.

Poor site structure

Problem: A poorly organized site makes it difficult for the user to find information or to enjoy the experience of visiting the site. The visitors to the site get lost and confused and leave in frustration.

Solutions: A tight, well woven, hierarchical structure lends tremendous strength to a site, its ease of use and its ability to convey the message effectively. Prioritization of content is very



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important. The first order of the day should be to agree on a structure that delivers maximum impact.

Good site organization is a structure that puts similar information together. Additional tools to make it easier for site navigation include a site map showing an overview of how the site is laid out and an easy method to click to any page of the site; and a search box that lets the visitor type in a word or phrase and find pages where that word occurs.

Difficult navigation

Problem: Poor navigation on your website forces the user to use the browser BACK button and to return to the home page at every step to navigate to the different pages of the site. Sites with poor navigation are difficult to use and tedious to the user.

Solutions: In order for your visitors to find what they are looking it must be easy for them to move easily from one page and one section to another.

Access to all primary locations on the site must be available from all pages. User must not be required to return 'HOME' each time he/she wants to reach another part of the site. Dropdown and fly-out menus can provide access to even lower level pages, if necessary.

- Navigation must be clear, concise and readable.
- The choice of foreground and background, and mouse-over colors make all the difference as do the shape of buttons/links.
- All links should be one word, two at maximum.
- Links to all major sections of the site should be on every page
- Navigation should be consistent in layout and placement on the pages
- Navigation should always be a single line (top bar) or a single column.

Missing and broken links

Problems: Are all the links on your website working? The Internet is ever-changing. Broken links can be caused by other websites changing their names, the website moved or being unavailable. Check your website on a regular basis to see if the links to other sites are still active. Internal links to pages inside your own site also may become outdated or broken as you add or change information.

Solutions: Check your site and test the links on a regular basis; Use automated checking such as www.siteinspector.com. Put a feedback form on your site for users to report broken links.

No consistency

Problems: If your website has no common theme and is a hodge podge of fonts, colors, styles and graphics types, then it is not pleasing to the eye and presents an unprofessional appearance. The level of presentation and design on the Internet has greatly improved over the



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past several years. Competitor sites in your industry with professional and effective presentations will have the edge.

Solutions: Consistency across the site in the following areas is a complete and total must:

- Layout
- Fonts
- Colors
- Sizes (e.g. graphics, logos, etc.)

Cluttered

Problems: Has your website grown over time and in the process accumulated a variety of styles, banners, images that cause distraction and make it difficult to understand what you have to offer?

Solutions: Visitors to Internet sites are often browsing and looking for specific information. Pages that are too busy and have several different types of banners, flashing icons, and many different sizes and styles of graphics are not appealing, not effective and are distracting.

Disorganized

Problem: Does your website lack an organized structure, pages and sections that have just been added in overtime but do not really fit the structure?

Solutions: Internet websites often grow over time with new alliances, new products, and changes to your business model. Periodically review your entire website to see that the organization of the information makes sense and that the website accurately reflects your business.

Multiple fonts and colors

Problem: Some fonts and color combinations are very difficult to read – for example red letters on a black background. Is your site legible and easy to read? Or does the visitor to the site give up because it has too many distractions and no clear design.

Solutions: Multiple fonts and colors can be distracting to the web site visitor. Select a set of fonts – no more than 3 for the headings, navigation buttons, and text areas of the site. The fonts and styles should never distract from the message that you are trying to convey.

Poor download time

Problem: Internet users want to see your pages load quickly. If they have to wait more than 5 seconds they will likely give up and go elsewhere – to your competitors. Poor download times



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can be caused by many factors 1) large file sizes on the graphics 2) slow servers 3) user connection to the Internet; 4) bandwidth congestion due to high traffic. The hosting for your website is important. Free is not always best if you lose customers.

Solutions: Graphics must be optimized and programmed to speed the download process. Using consistent graphics for sections and pages will speed the loading as the graphics are reused on additional pages. Be selective about what to show and give visitors the option of viewing larger graphics by clicking on small thumbnail images. If you are using graphics on your site, design the page so that important information loads first. Streaming videos and audio files should be hosted on servers that can support the bandwidth requirements.

No Domain name

Problem: If your website is using a domain name that is hosted by another company it lacks your professional identity. If the URL for your website is long and difficult to type in, your clients will find it difficult to remember. For example www.allbusiness.com/~myplumbingshop.htm Website URLs that are hosted under free services often come along with banner ads and other pop-up windows that give an unprofessional appearance.

Solutions: Domain names are now easily available with many different extensions that may be appropriate for your business. It is now easier to obtain a domain name that is unique to you. Be careful when choosing the name that it will be easy to use. It is better to NOT use dashes and underscores in the name, as these are more likely to cause a mistake on the part of users typing in the URL. Be sure too to keep track of the domain name expiry date and to extend it or it could be purchased by someone else.

Site not found

Problem: When you type in your site URL do you get a “Page not found” error message? Has your current hosting solution failed you? Visitors will become frustrated if this happens often.

Solutions: It may have been tempting to choose that “free web space” advertisement but it is wise for a business to evaluate the reliability and security of the hosting service. There are many well-respected hosting companies that offer cost effective solutions for shared hosting, co-location or other hosting solution. It is a good idea to get an evaluation of the technical requirements from your web master.



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Text is too wordy

Problem: Is the text on your website too wordy and long?

Solutions: The text should be edited, preferably by a professional editor. The objective is to keep the text tight, packed, direct and full of impact. Attention span on the web is very short, and no one reads beyond a scroll and a half. Longer text should go in as PDF or full text page.

Content is not up to date

Problem: Is the content of your site up to date and accurately reflecting your business? When was the last time that you did a full review of your website? Businesses change, grow and develop and if your website is not updated on a regular and timely basis your site may have outdated content, and be providing incorrect information to your current and potential customers. This will cause frustrations for your site visitors, embarrassment to you as a company, and perhaps even cause some legal issues.

Solutions: Your website represents your business. Review the content regularly and have a plan in place for updating the content. Have a regular workflow and website maintenance plan in place with someone responsible for adding new information to the site and making the necessary changes. If it is appropriate for your company, be sure that the information is reviewed by your legal advisors before adding to the website.

Treating the Internet as print

Problem: Does your website treat the web as just an electronic version of printed materials? Print and web are two totally different experiences and the quickest way to chase away a visitor is to set up a web site as though it were print.

Solutions: Use the strengths and capabilities of the Internet to present the information in an appropriate manner for the medium. To use the Internet effectively, evaluate how the site can be more interactive and more engaging of the visitor.

Poorly designed online catalog

Problem: Are your customers able to find the product they are looking for? Are the categories and descriptions of the items easy to use? For large catalogs is there a search tool? Are there product images that show the product to advantage? Does the catalog have a consistent flow in showing the product details?

Solutions: The objective of an ecommerce site is to increase sales. A well designed database catalog will have a consistent set of information about each of the products and provide



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enough detail and one or more images of the product with accurate pricing information. Your catalog must also enable you to update it – to add and remove products, to change prices, and to update the information as required.

Poor shopping cart

Problem: Does your shopping cart give the customer confidence during the shopping experience? Are customers able to add and remove items from the cart? Is it clear what tax and shipping and handling charges will apply? Do they know before they start shopping what forms of payment will be accepted?

Solutions: Provide information to your customers about your shopping cart – how will totals be calculated, what shipping and handling will be charged, how soon will the item be shipped, what forms of payment do you accept. Check that your shopping cart is calculating totals correctly. Enabling users to save their shopping cart for a later session will also increase your sales as often users want to do additional research or are not able to complete the shopping in the first session.

No user help

Problem: Customers may have questions during the shopping process on your site – or general questions about your business. If they are not able to find the answers on your site they may go elsewhere. If the shopping experience or action items are not clear they will not feel safe in completing the transaction. You lose the sale.

Solutions: Add a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section to the site. Add live help or live customer support during working hours and consider adding this on a 24 x 7 basis through an outsourced call center for larger businesses. Make the CONTACT information easily accessible throughout the site and give options of contacting you by email, filling out a form and by phone.

Problems with payments

Problem: Are you accepting credit cards on your website? Is the credit card information secure? Are you using a credit card processing service?

Solutions: Adding the ability for your customers to purchase directly from your website will increase your sales. As the familiarity of shopping on the Internet grows, customers like the ease of use of shopping on the Internet. However – their credit card information must be secure. Check if the card information is being collected on a page that has https:// (notice the “s”), and work with a reputable credit card processing company.



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Complex applications and new products

Problem: Is your business concept a new one? Is the product or service that you are selling hard to understand? Are your potential customers mystified about how it works?

Solutions: Demos, tutorials and walkthroughs are a significantly important component of a site, especially if the site deals with an application. Flash and animated demos and tutorials can very effectively convey the process, the operation, and ultimately the real value of the application in direct and understandable terms.

Contact information is difficult to find

Problem: When your site visitors want to contact you with questions or suggestions is it easy for them to find your email address and phone number?

Solutions: provide a link in a consistent location on each page that takes the visitor to your contact page. Provide one or more email addresses, a feedback or inquiry form, and phone number.

Poor customer service

Problem: When someone contacts your business from the website what procedures do you have in place to respond? Who is responsible? What is the response time? What processes can you put in place to improve the responsiveness? A poor response time, or no response at all will reflect badly on your business.

Solutions: One of the downfalls of business has been the poor response to customer service. Provide information on your site about normal response times e.g. "We will respond to your inquiry within 2 business days." Training and procedures for staff are also essential in making the process work smoothly. Auto responders that provide an assurance that the message was received, and for heavily trafficked sites include a response tracking number if available.