

First steps 3 | Planning your website

This article by a web designer is intended as a checklist of things you will need to think about and plan before contacting a web designer. It forces you to cast a critical eye over what you actually want from your site and how you might manage the process.

So you've been made responsible for your organisation's website. It may not be the biggest or most complex project you have ever undertaken but the chances are it is not an area you are particularly familiar with. It's down to you to make sure the site goes live on time and within budget but you really aren't sure how best to go about things. Well hopefully the questions listed below will help you to start thinking in the right way.

Do you need a website and if so why?

I know it sounds like a silly question but it's worth asking even if the decision has already been made higher up in the company. Sometimes the decision to build a website is based more on the, "well everybody else seems to have one" approach than on any sound business reasoning. If you do conclude that a website is right for you (or if the decision is out of your hands) make sure you have a clear understanding of why you need the site. Without a defined vision at the outset your final site is unlikely to provide much benefit to your business.

What is the aim of your site?

So you have decided that you need a site and believe you have a firm idea of why. The next question is, what do you want the site to achieve? Do you have a clear list of success criteria? What would determine the success of the site? Is it about increasing sales? Is it about information dissemination? Do you expect it to streamline key business processes?

Who is your target audience?

It is important to have a clear picture of who your target audience is before you start building the site. Many organisations end up with a long list of target groups when they go through this process. The trouble with that is your site ends up appealing to none of them effectively. If you have a list then I suggest that you sit down and prioritise.

Who is going to be responsible for project managing the site?

Are you going to be the person who manages the construction of the web site on a day to day basis? Even if you choose to outsource the web design there is still a lot of internal project management to do. You need somebody to gather content, handle suppliers, consult with various departments... the list goes on. Exactly who is going to deal with these day-to-day issues?

Who is going to be responsible for running the site?

Once the site has been launched who is going to manage the site long term? Who is going to handle site updates? Who is going to market and promote your web presence? Who is going to deal with enquiries and sales from the site?

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What content do you want on the site?

Do you have a clear vision as to what you want to communicate through the site? It is important to balance the message you want to get across with the information your users are going to want to see. It might even be wise to ask some existing clients what they would like to see from your site. Also, be sure to remember that the web is not the same as a printed brochure. People don't read on-line, they scan. Therefore content has to be more direct and shorter - less is more!

What do you want the site to be able to do?

A website is about more than just content. What do you want it to be able to do? Do you want users to be able to email you? Should they be able to buy online or just search your catalogue? Do you want to provide interactive functions like message boards and chat rooms? Try and plan exactly what functional elements your site will contain.

How is the site going to be structured?

Map out how your site is to be organised, identifying which pages link to other pages. But be careful not to organise the site based on your company's organisation. It is important to remember that your users don't think about the structure of your company, they think about their needs and what they are trying to achieve. Content should always be organised around the questions a user may come to the site with.

Are you going to build it in house or outsource it?

If you decide you want to build your site internally are you sure that you have the capabilities to deliver all the functionality required? Are you confident that the site will look professional and won't undermine your brand? Do you have staff within the organisation with the time to work on this project? If you decide to outsource the project, who are you going to use? Can you afford them within your budget?

What is your budget for the site?

Don't forget that your budget will not just have to cover any out sourced elements of the project. It will also have to cover hosting, ongoing maintenance, as well as online marketing and promotion. Setting a budget is never easy. Try establishing the idea of return on investment. Also compare it to other similar activities. For example if you are setting up an ecommerce site compare it to opening a new store. If you are creating a marketing site compare it with existing printing costs. Look at cost saving as well. How much will the site save you in the long term? All of these factors should be taken into account.

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Are there any constraints on the look and feel?

Does your company have any existing design guidelines? Do you have an existing colour scheme or set of fonts? Should the logo appear on the site? Would you like your website to tie in with existing publicity material?

Does the site have any special requirements?

Will the site have to appear in multiple languages? Do you need it to work on the small screen size of a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA)? Should the site be accessible to the visually impaired?

How are you going to source all the content?

Where is the content for the site going to come from? If you want users to be able to see the location of your stores where are you going to get the maps? If you want photography of products do you already have them available? Do you have copyright to use content on the web? Who is going to write the content for the site? Do they have the time? What format has the web design company asked you to provide content in?

Where are you going to host the site?

How much does the hosting cost? How reliable is the server? Do they provide 24/7 support? Do they provide telephone support as well as email? Do they support the technologies you need? Do they provide traffic monitoring? How much space do they provide? How much bandwidth will they give you?

How are you going to launch the site?

Once you have finished the site how are you going to introduce it to the world? Are you going to contact existing clients? Do you need to update stationary and other print material? Are you going to do a media launch? What about a news release?

How are you going to get repeat visitors?

Because users rarely make a purchase on their first visit to a website how are you going to ensure they will come back again? Are you going to run competitions? Do you have special offers? Will you provide a free newsletter? What is the hook that makes your site sticky? If you are looking for impartial advice regarding your website, why not contact Business Link Somerset on 08457 211112 and ask to speak to one of their e-business advisers? They have a great deal of experience in helping businesses to map out a web design strategy and develop effective websites.

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