

5 CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE WEBSITES

*What do I need to consider when building a new website?
What does it take to build an effective website?
How do I conceptualize this whole process?*

I liken the process of building a website to that of having a house built. For when we start the process of building a house, we determine how big it needs to be based on the stuff that we have (or want) to put in it. But we don't want to live in a big plain box, lacking in any personal style. We want a nice looking house that fits our lifestyle. It also needs to have a good flow from the garage to the kitchen, the bedrooms to the bathrooms. The laundry room needs to be in a convenient location. The living room should have seating that is conducive for good conversation and/or watching television. It should have electricity, running water, a stove, sink, refrigerator, and all the customary conveniences of a modern life. All of this takes a considerable amount of planning before a single shovel hits the dirt. This illustration is very similar to having a website built. In many ways the website is based on the amount of content that will go into it. But it also needs to have a look that reflects the culture of your organization and appeals to your audience. It should be easy to navigate with a flow that is natural for your visitors. It will probably need some sort of functionality and some standard elements that we find on most websites today.

That might seem like a lot to take in, but they can be broken down into their 5 basic aspects.

LAYOUT DESIGN

Content is king but it is useless unless it is presented well. First impressions matter. You want to have good curb appeal; so good design, graphics, images and layout all work together to provide a welcoming atmosphere for your visitors. They want to know that you have taken the time and the thought energy for their benefit. It also tells the visitor that you care about the details. When a visitor perceives you care about your website then they will feel confident that you will put the same quality, care and expertise into what you provide and how you will work or serve them.

Back in the day, store owners would make sure the sidewalk is clean first thing in the morning. They would make sure the windows were spotless and that the aisles were clear and uncluttered throughout the day. These days your website is your store. You want to make sure that your site looks up to date and visitors can navigate around your site with ease.

CONTENT

Content is king when it comes to search results on Google, Bing, Yahoo, etc. How the big search engines determine which sites should rank higher in search results has evolved over the years. There were 'tricks' that websites used years ago that will actually get a website 'dinged' now. A ding for a website is the same as a ding in the finish of your new car. It's not a good thing. There are common practices that should be followed, like the use of Header Tags (such as H1, H2, H3, etc.), Title Tags, Alt Tags, Keywords, and more.

But the most valuable technique is to use your Keywords within the body copy, headers and titles of the website. They should be woven naturally throughout the website, keeping in mind that certain keywords will want to be concentrated on relevant web pages. A good website appears to do it naturally, but it takes planning and work to accomplish this. Afterward the website should be reviewed on a regular basis to monitor the performance of the relevant pages and their corresponding keywords. There are a few ways to do this. Google analytics is the most comprehensive but there are other tools, such as heat mapping (which will reveal where visitors are clicking on your site).

RESPONSIVE DESIGN

What is "Responsive web design"? Responsive web design (RWD) (as defined by Wikipedia) is an approach to web design aimed at allowing desktop web pages to be viewed in response to the size of the screen or web browser one is viewing with.

When smart phones first came out, and we navigated to a website, we would see the entire website in the confines of our 3.5 inch screen. It required the viewer to zoom in on the site so they could read the copy, then scroll around in all directions in order to navigate the website. Then came the mobile website, which is a redesign of the existing website so that all the content was viewed in a linear stream. We only needed to scroll up and down, and the text was large enough to be read without zooming. It was a simple solution to the original website, unless you constantly updated the website. You would have to remember to update the mobile version as well as the original website. Twice the amount of work for the same results. Then came the responsive web design. The RWD uses the one website and adapts the layout to the size of the screen in which it is viewed. It can even be coded so that some content shows up on the smaller screens, and other content shows up on the full width view. It is very versatile and makes it convenient to develop one website that can be viewed on any size device. Initially it takes a little longer to design, but saves time throughout the life of the website when it comes to adding, updating and removing content.

Depending on when your website was built, it will fall into one of those 3 categories. The issue with the first category (a non RWD website without a mobile website) is that it will be dinged by Google. In other words, the site will not register as high on a search results page as a competitors website which is built with RWD or has a mobile site.

OFFER SOMETHING FOR FREE

Everyone wants something for free. Just go to a sporting event and see how many people jump, reach and yell for free shirts that are shot out of hand held air cannons. In order to help attract visitors to your site, it's a good idea to offer something for them to download. Information is a good place to start. It's best to share information related to your industry. As an example: If you have a tree nursery, you might try putting together a PDF of how to take care of your existing tree or shrubs. Or you could install a weather app in your site, letting people know when they need protect their trees during extreme cold weather. Or information on how to kill vines that invade your yard. Or...you get the idea.

Google process 40,000 queries every second. They may be asking questions that you could answer! There is a lot of free information that you can offer your visitors that will not betray any of your trade secrets. You probably already do it and don't realize it. It happens whenever you're talking to new customers/clients/patrons. You may hear the same question hundreds of times. Use that as inspiration, and start there.

People respond well to people (or organizations) who are open and willing to help. You can be that person 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, all over the community and the world. All it takes is a little thought. Most of the time it would be information that you find yourself giving most of the time anyway. The only difference is that it's formatted and designed and ready for download to anyone as they visit your site.

UPDATE THE CONTENT REGULARLY

Keep your information current. You can leave old information on your site (as long as it is still applicable). You don't need to reinvent all your content, but the times we live in are constantly changing. The way we interact with each other; the methods in which we talk to each other; the way we buy, sell and donate; and how we live our lives. There isn't an industry, trade or organization that has not been affected by the changes in technology. As a result there are aspects of your organization that will be adapting and modifying itself in order to move with the times. The content on your website should reflect those changes.

A couple of popular ideas are blogs or a "Current News" section, among many other ways to keep your site current. If you update these areas on a regular basis, it will give your visitors a reason to come back. After all, the goal is to keep your organization in the minds of people who have used your services, or benefited from your organization. So offer them a connection; connect with them on a human and personal level. Keep them interested in the relationship so that when they need or want your services, you will be at the top of their mind. If they are talking with family, friends and colleagues, you want your organization on the tip of their tongue...in a good way.

First impressions do matter, but character is what keeps people coming back to your organization. Your website should be a reflection of that.