How to create a website that works

Whether you're creating a website from scratch or planning a revamp these are the critical steps you need to take **in this order!**

Decide exactly what you want your website to do

Be specific and realistic. E.g. unless you're selling products online It's not realistic to make sales directly from your website, but it is realistic to expect people to contact you as a result of visiting it.

You might decide you want people to:

- Sign up to your list
- Email you
- Fill in an enquiry form
- Telephone you
- Comment on your blog
- Contribute in a forum or chat room

Ensure you have a clear idea of the purpose of each page

What is the action you want people to take when they've looked at that page? Do you want them to go to another page for more information; look at your blog; visit your resources section; pick up the phone? This will influence the message that you put on the page.

Choose the journey you want the visitor to take

Where do you want them to go next? For instance, which of your services/products do you want to lead them to first from the home page? When you're on the services page which pages should you be encouraging them to visit next? This will help you to create your sitemap and will influence the navigation that appears on each page.

Know what you want your site to look like

Don't leave the designer with a blank sheet of paper – it will take more time (and cost you more) and you may end up with something that's not quite what you had in mind.

The easiest way to meet this challenge is to:

- Decide the colours you want – this is often dictated by your brand. You don't want clashing colours or too many different colours.
- Search the web for sites you like the look of – they don't have to be in your own industry (although that's a good place to start – know your competition), they do need to have a similar approach to the one you're aiming for. For example, if you're not going to be an ecommerce site, then it's no good looking at ecommerce sites for inspiration! Create a list of 4-10 sites for your web designer to look at so they get a feel for what you want.
- Look at the existing work of 2-3 web designers that you are thinking of engaging and see if they're anywhere near the sort of style you're aiming for. Often cheap and cheerful isn't what will serve you best. Be careful you don't sacrifice quality and image for price.

- Create a clear brief – it doesn't have to be a ten page document, half a page may be enough, but if you don't know what you want, don't be surprised if you get something you're not happy with.

Choose a web designer who can deliver

There are web designers and there are web developers. Sometimes a designer also does development and vice versa. Your choice will depend on the complexity and functionality that you want to have in your site.

A web designer will create the visual look and feel of the site. Some web designers can put together a basic website and get it online perfectly adequately.

A web developer will create the 'back-end', that's the programming that makes the site carry out specific actions. With complex sites where there are shopping carts, forums, chatrooms, a database or calculator of any kind, you'll need a developer or a designer capable of some level of development.

If you choose a designer who doesn't have the development capability you'll end up having additional costs for that part of the work.

If you choose a developer who isn't particularly good at design, you could end up with a site that isn't visually attractive or have an added cost in getting a design created separately.

Most professional designers and developers have connections and can provide a 'joined up' service, even if they don't do it themselves, but it's a good move to be clear on what the parameters of their expertise are.

Create a schedule

Know the time frames you'll be working within. Have realistic expectations – talk to your chosen designer/developer about how long it will take to deliver and what they will need from you (and when) to ensure everything stays on track.

Ask them to build in 'Sod's Law' time! From experience most web projects run over deadlines! However, don't expect miracles – if you want a good quality website give the people who are creating time to do a good job. Don't come along and want it up and running by the end of next week!

Creating traffic

This can be done in a number of ways – and it's important to consider this before the copy for the site is written and definitely before it goes live – although it will be an ongoing activity.

The first step is to write the key words and phrases for each of your products/services down *for every page*. Aim for no more than 3 key words or phrases to be featured per page.

There are a number of ways of creating traffic:

- Engage an expert in Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) – they have many ways to help your site go up the search engine rankings. Don't expect this to be cheap, but with the right expert it can make a huge difference to the enquiries or sales your site generates.
- Create a Google Adwords campaign. This will be based on your keywords – it's possible to do it yourself, but you can lose a lot of money if you don't know how to do it properly. Either get an expert to do it or invest some time (and maybe money) in learning how yourself.
- Social media campaigns – using Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and article marketing,

blogging and other content placement. This is not a quick fix and you will need to dedicate time and effort to it. Done well it really works well – done half-heartedly, it's a waste of time!

All of these methods don't work alone.

Keeping people on your site

Getting high volumes of traffic or visitors is only half the equation; when they get to your site you need to keep them long enough to persuade them to take action. This is a combination of:

- Engaging them fast – you have about 3-9 seconds for them to establish that your site has a high likelihood of delivering what they're looking for.
- Visual attractiveness – they have to get a good feeling about the site and that is usually generated by the way it looks.
- Making it easy for them to find what they want – so things are where they're looking, not hidden in unexpected places.
- Making it easy for them to get your message – so nothing that distracts them or confuses them.

Writing the copy

Engaging people is usually down to the first thing they see telling them that this website has something to do with what they thought they wanted. Usually that's the headline so it needs to be right where their eyes connect with the screen – you need to know where that is.

If you decide to write the copy yourself you will need to have a really clear idea of who your target audience is, what they want, why they might buy your products or services and what the benefits of those products or services are to them.

You will need to stop being the business owner and be able to sit objectively in your customer's shoes.

Every page needs a headline and you might consider whether:

- **Welcome to our website**

- **Services**

- **Widgets, Widgets London, Widgets for industry**

… work to tell people what they want to know.

A good headline intrigues, informs or creates empathy.

Next you need to be able to incorporate your key words/phrases into the copy without bending it out of shape. Gone are the days when the first paragraph could be stuffed with keywords – all that does now is to send visitors away quickly.

You must write about them and what they get, not about what you do.

You need to ensure you ask them to take action – and make it easy for them to do so.

You need to find means to get them to read as much as possible (most people don't read on screen, they scan) – ensure that the key bits of your message stand out. There are many different devices that help you to do this.

TIP: When the copy is written get someone who is pedantic about English to read it and check for grammar/spelling etc. Then get one of your existing clients or someone who would be a potential client that you already know and ask them to review it to see if the messages on each page appeal to them and tell them enough to create interest.

Ensure your web designer incorporates a content management system (CMS) to allow you access to the content areas so that you can update your site regularly. The less activity on your site, the less frequently the search engines bother to visit.

… and finally

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Lesley Morrissey is an expert in readability and specialises in helping people to develop a website that works for their business.

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