Why Build a Website?

by Irene D. Gaudet

Before You Begin

The recent push to *"be online"* has seen many businesses, groups, and individuals deciding *frantically* that they need to be online without really asking themselves – WHY? Before you do anything else, you need to answer this very basic question. You need to determine what the core purpose of the website is, and if you cannot answer that, then you need to go back to the basics.

- Do you want to inform or educate?
- Do you need to showcase your "bricks and mortar" establishment?
- Are you selling or promoting something?

Every website, business or otherwise, must serve a *definable* purpose, and that is where many websites fall short. They serve no real purpose because the owner never gave it enough thought. **It's not the website's fault.** A website is only as good as what you put into it, what you make of it. The only "life" a website has is the vision of its designer and owner and the subsequent effort they put in to make that vision a reality. If the human element doesn't do a good job of defining the building blocks, the digital element – the website – will serve no purpose.

Building an effective website isn't rocket science. However, building an effective, well-designed website that works for its owner, that actually serves a purpose, is all about definition before design. First, let's go over some basics.

The First Step - Research

Many of us spend a lot of time online. If you don't, then now is the time to start, because once you define the purpose, your next job is research! As you spend time online, make some notes of sites you like - their content, their style, the colours, the layout. Bookmark them so you have them recorded to discuss with your designer. Use this information to envision what you would like to see in your final site. Be creative!

But you're not finished with your research. Before any graphics are drawn; any text (copy) is laid out; meta tags, key words or titles penned; or the first line of code is written, you need to sit down and define your website's purpose, budget, target audience, and content. Then you need to work on the design and navigation. That is a lot of work to do before you even see your site online. This is the foundation necessary to build a website that works and serves its purpose. Finally, when that's all complete, you must then define the marketing that will bring visitors to your site.

It may seem to be a daunting task, but it can be made simple (not necessarily easy). However, it NEEDS to be done at the onset to create an effective website. You'd be amazed at how many really bad websites there are out there. **Yours does not have to be one of them.** If you have spent any amount of time online, you may come to share my conclusion that many websites don't do a good job of working for their owners. If your website isn't working for you, why then, does it exist? This goes back to purpose.

The Next Steps

- **Define the Purpose**

Every website must have a purpose. Purpose drives everything: the audience, the design, the navigation, the content, and the marketing. There have been entire articles written on purpose, but basically there are five categories of purpose: **to inform, to educate, to entertain, to generate leads, to sell,** or some combination of these. If you fail to define the purpose of the website, everything else you do will be wasted or at best a watered-down effort.

- **Define the Budget**

Every website, no matter how large or small, must have a realistic budget, with *"realistic"* being the key word. You may want your site to be able to do a million cool things, but is this realistic if your budget is just a few hundred dollars? Work with your designer to set realistic expectations of function and "style" supported by your budget. A competent designer can create a web structure that allows you to evolve your site as your budget allows improvement or augmentation. Working with a competent designer may save you from making extensive and expensive redesign or re-configurations down the road.

- **Define the Target Audience**

Your target audience is that segment of the virtual public that you hope to attract to your site. If you have no idea who your audience is, how can you expect to design a website that will appeal to them? What is their age range? What is their education? How often are they online? What do they go online to do? What key words or phrases do they use in their online searches? Your target audience could be customers, investors, job seekers, info seekers, or? Define your target audience, then determine how best to attract and serve them.

- **Define the Content**

Content is king! Content refers to the information on your website, be it graphics, text, downloadable items, or even video. It is vital that your website content be text rich, succinct, and well-written to appeal to the live visitors as well as search engine spiders. Are there organization colours, fonts, graphics or logos that should be included? Content also helps create continuity with search engines and drives placement. Does your content tie in with your purpose and your

search engine optimization efforts? Purpose will define the content which then helps set your search engine key words, meta tags, titles, and descriptions which drive your ability to be found by your public.

- **Define the Design**

Website design theory has changed over the last couple of years, primarily because the search engines are driven by CONTENT! As stated previously, content is king. "Cool" graphics and flash don't rate as well with search engines. Most people won't stay long or return to a site if content is weak or lacking. However, you need to factor in your target audience when considering site design. What will catch the eye of that audience? What will keep them there? What will make them return? Work with your designer to create a blend to catch their eyes and capture their minds.

- **Define the Navigation**

Bad navigation is the number one reason website visitors abandon a website. Navigation is the chain of links the visitor uses to get around your site. If your site is difficult or impossible to get around, you've got problems. Frustrate your visitors and they will click out quickly. There is a 3 click rule which simply states that if it takes a visitor more than 3 clicks to get to any page on your site, your navigation needs improvement.

- **Define the Marketing**

It's done; your website is now online. If you build it, will they come? Not likely, at least not without a good marketing campaign. Your website should become a viable part of all your marketing efforts, online and off. Put the website address on your business cards, brochures, letterhead, and e-mails. Include the address in your ads; print, TV, and radio. You might even put it on your voice mail message. If you do online marketing, figure out where your target audience surfs and advertise there. If marketing is foreign to you, do yourself a favour and call in an expert. Many businesses fail because they simply do not know how to market their products and services effectively. This is also the downfall of most business websites.

Final Words

So now, if you haven't crawled under your desk and said, "What have I gotten into?" go out, do your homework and your research and build a FANTASTIC, yet functional website!