

starting your website project



Here are three comprehensive posts from our blog, refined and updated through feedback from our clients. Together, they cover the essentials of building a successful website.

- 1** **Nine questions** to ask before you start your web project
- 2** Starting your web project: **The content stage**
- 3** Eight key tips for writing **superior web content**

Nine questions to ask before you start your web project



You're about to develop your organization's first website or overhaul the one you have. You start thinking about the content – text, illustrations, downloadable materials, photo galleries, the blog – and how to present it all.

But wait! Before you even get to that stage, it's important to step back and get a wider view. You need to identify your site's purpose and the kind of results you expect. Your site has to do what you want it to do. Otherwise, what's the point?





Large or small, your site needs to support your overall goals and strategies.

Figuring out how to get those results determines the site's structure. And the structure will shape the content.

Here are 9 key questions that will help you lay the foundation for developing a manageable and affordable website project.

1 What are your **business goals**?

It's important to distinguish between your business goals and the goals you set for your website. Your site will be developed to support your business goals in specific ways, based on the questions that follow.

2 Who are your **primary** and **secondary audiences**?

Your audience consists of both the people currently using your services, and new users you want to attract. Your primary audience is your core users, such as members or customers. But you likely have secondary audiences such as peers, funders, government bodies, or the general public. Consider how to address each of these.

You may find it useful to create a "user persona" (or multiple ones) to define your audience(s). Age, gender, employment and social status, language skills and special needs are some elements you could use to build the personas. If you have a number of different user personas, think about designing multiple communications approaches that will appeal to each of them.

3 How does your site fit into your **marketing campaign**?

A website is usually part of a wider marketing strategy or campaign. Your site by itself is not a marketing strategy.

A website can range from an active online hub that manages all your needs, to a page of simple information that helps people find you in the real world. Large or small, your site needs to support your overall goals and strategies. In order to determine the scope of the work involved in developing your site, it's important to know how you want to use it.





If the site is doing what you want it to do, how will you measure success?

- 4** What **communications tools or channels** are you going to use in your marketing and where does the website fit in?

Communications tools can include email and e-newsletters, social media, print advertising, direct mail, or person-to-person and business-to-business networking, including word of mouth. A website can also contain communications tools such as online forms, a blog, or newsletter sign-ups.

Sometimes all your tools are designed to drive users to your website to “close the deal”. Other times the key connection with your audience happens elsewhere.

- 5** What are your **key messages**?

What are the main things your audiences should know and remember about your organization and services?

Your key messages can sometimes be distilled from your mission statement. Your messages should communicate what services you provide, your core values, and be presented in language that reinforces the themes. Multiple key messages can address specific audiences or services and should work together to create an overall brand message.

- 6** What are your **desired outcomes** for the site, both general and measurable?

Another way of looking at this is: if the site is doing what you want it to do, how will it affect your business, and how will you be able to gauge success?

Desired outcomes for the website are not the same as your business goals. You need to look at how your website supports your larger goals, through specific services or functions it provides. Your site may offer online appointment booking, a link to make charitable donations, a downloadable info sheet, or a newsletter signup form. How does each of these functions contribute to your business plan, and how can you measure their success?





Calls to action highlight your site content and reinforce your key messages.

7 What are your **calls to action**?

These are developed through assessing your desired outcomes, marketing strategy and key messages. You may have one main desired outcome (for a client to make an appointment or a user to make a charitable donation). Some of your users may be ready to do that immediately, and you will develop clear, directive calls to action for this main goal.

Other users may want more information first. They may want to sign up for a newsletter, download an info sheet or read your blog. Secondary calls to action pave the way for the primary ones. They highlight your site content, reinforce your key messages, and help you determine interest. If a user makes contact with you, it can give you a chance to follow up.

Some examples of calls to action:

- Stay informed. Subscribe to our newsletter
- Donate today and support... (insert tangible goal here)
- Call or email us today for a ...(free consultation / more information / to get your free access code etc.)
- Download your free ...(report on issue x / action sheet / document about...)
- Watch a video, Read the latest news
- Fill out a feedback form
- Schedule an appointment

8 What **special functions** does your site require?

These might include items such as a calendar, a blog, purchase and payment options, donations, appointment booking, password protected areas, forms and more.)





Websites take time to develop. And they require management and maintenance once launched.

- 9 What is your **capacity** and **commitment** to work on this project? Website projects take time to develop. And, they require ongoing management and maintenance once they're launched. Be sure to build this into your expectations and into the scope of site you aim to build.

At Working Design, our first step in helping develop your site is to understand what you do.

Your answers to these nine questions will guide us. Next, we work together to arrive at a comprehensive content outline. The outline lets us know how big the site will be and all the things that will go in it.

The next chapter in our series, “**Starting your web project: The content stage**”, will help you assess and organize your content.



Starting your web project: The content stage



After you've answered the nine key questions raised in **Part 1 of our Starting a Website Project series**, it's time to think about content: text, images and quite a bit more.

Here's your checklist:

- Content Inventory
- The Content Outline
- Site Navigation
- Special Functions
- The Visual Identity





When you're listing your content, don't worry about where everything will go. Use this phase to brainstorm.

Start by making a detailed **content inventory** of everything you want to include on the site. What's required to tell your story and get results?

Your inventory will be unique to your business and site goals. It will be tailored to relay key messages to your main audiences.

Here are some examples of what it might contain:

- narrative text explaining the benefits of your organization / product / business plus your services, your people
- calls to action, quotes and testimonials, blog posts, news, events, program descriptions, and a search function
- images (both photos and illustrations) and image galleries
- information graphics, charts or tables,
- calendars, shopping carts or donation portals, video or audio, Twitter feeds, user signup forms, feedback forms
- integration with various third party services, such as membership management, Customer Relationship Management (CRM), e-commerce sites.
- a library of publications or resources organized and searchable by categories

When you're making the list, don't worry about where everything will go. Use this phase to brainstorm. Note every conceivable item that can, should or could be included, and all the different ways it could be presented.

Videos, information graphics, clickable buttons and blog entries are different ways of conveying your message. See how other sites do it, what techniques appeal to you, and what will connect best with your audience.

When all that's done, you're ready for the next critical phase: organizing the inventory into a comprehensive content outline.





The site content and structure will mirror your organization and its goals.

The Content Outline

A good website gives your audience what it's looking for while letting them know what's important and useful about you.

Your content outline puts all this together in a series of logically structured sections which make it easy for your readers to find what they are looking for and lead them to what you would like them to know and do.

The site content and structure will mirror your organization and its goals. It will ensure that your key messages and calls to action are visible and obvious to the distracted viewer. Your primary services, products and offers will be immediately accessible.

Every page of your site must direct visitors to another page or action leading to one of your desired outcomes. Those could be a donation request, a subscription sign-up, a sale or a phone call. Each page needs to be carefully considered.

One tip to keep in mind is to think like a user. What will your typical member, client, or visitor want from this site and how will they find it right away?

Site Navigation

The site's top level categories will run in a lean and well-crafted menu bar that will appear on each page. Don't run a dozen items here. Too many sites have so many menu items that it's hard for users to make a choice on what to click. That won't work well. You could lose the visitor before they even start.

Keep the options as simple and direct as possible. If you have detailed information, place it in subcategories (or subpages) of the main entries.





The way your site looks – the visual interface – is the first thing users will notice. Make it good!

Your site and its content should be easily scannable. Web readers browse. They're far less likely than print readers to read much of your content especially when they first land on your site.

Keep in mind the three kinds of readers your site needs to address:

- the scanners,
- casual readers, and
- the committed.

Your content outline (and how you ultimately present your content) needs to have something for everyone. However, a significant portion of your visitors will be scanners.

Special Functions

In addition to text and images, there are a range of content features you might need that will make your site useful and engaging. Elements could include a publications library, a calendar, a shopping cart, donation area, a password protected zone, a search field or a member signup. You might also require third party services to be integrated onto your site such as a Twitter feed, YouTube video or a Flickr photo stream.

The Visual Identity

The way your site looks – what's called the visual interface or graphic user interface – is the first thing users will notice. Make it good! Readers take nanoseconds to decide if they like what they see or not. Their decision can be the difference between gaining a new customer, member, client or not.

Your visual identity will be based on the range of decisions that have been made about the site's structure and what needs to be included. The visuals – the logo, banner, typestyles, images and colours – can be based on your existing brand elements or they may involve something entirely new.





Your images and the information they contain are an important way to tell your story.

Using images The web is a visual medium. Readers are less likely to read and more likely to look. Your images and the information they contain are an important way to tell your story. They should do more than simply support the narrative content. They need to inform and convey your message.

Consider using one or all of the following: photos, illustrations, infographics, clickable buttons, innovative wayfinding devices and so on.

When thinking about what visuals to use, ask yourself what kind of images will best present and support your themes? If readers simply scan through the pages of your site, what information will they get from the photos, illustrations and other images?

Get Started!

Once you're done thinking about all of the things mentioned in this blog, you're ready to start working on your site! You've laid the foundation for the project and now it's time to start gathering content and shaping it into an effective and elegant communications tool.

Writing text will be one of your main activities. That's another story.

Check out the next entry in our series, “Eight key tips for writing superior website content.”



Eight key tips for writing superior web content



Writing for the web has unique requirements because of how people read on screens. We tend to scan content quickly on our smart phones or laptops rather than reading thoroughly.

Here are the top eight things you need to keep in mind when crafting content for your online readers:

1. Get to the point

The most important information must come first, followed by the details and background information. Journalists call this style of writing the inverted pyramid. A reader should be able to grasp the big picture – your key message – after the first sentence.



2. Short sentences

Be concise. Most web readers are really just web scanners. According to research from web writing guru Jakob Nielsen:

In research on how people read websites we found that 79 percent of our test users always scanned any new page they came across; only 16 percent read word-by-word.

So again, it's important you start with the most important information and follow that up with copy that is scannable. The next three tips focus on this objective.

3. Use lists and bullet points

This will break up your text, making it easier for readers to skim through. Why write out the services you offer in paragraph form when point form is easier to read (and write)?

4. Keep paragraphs short

Four sentences max, conveying one idea.

5. Use subheadings

This is another effective way to break up and organize text. Again, this makes it easier for your readers to quickly find the information that's most useful to them. Each subheading should be short and informative, summarizing your key message. Make sure your headings stand out by using bold formatting, or any other technique that makes them visible.

6. Make your content searchable

Search engine optimization, or SEO, means using keywords that will make it easier for readers to find your webpage. Ask yourself: If I were looking for this information, what would I type into Google? Those are your keywords, and the most important information – what you want your readers to know you know. Make sure it's at the top (see tip No. 1).



If you're not sure of which keywords to use, tools such as [Google's Keyword Planner](#) can help. The free web app lets you research possible keywords and provides insight into how they might perform based on historical search statistics and traffic estimates.

7. Use plain language

Without it, you don't have any keywords. If you make up words or use jargon, you're only making it harder for people to find you. Abbreviations and acronyms should also be avoided unless they are well known to your target audience.

How important is it to use familiar words that a reader would put into a search bar? As Jakob Nielsen explains:

Web users are growing ever-more search dominant. Search is how people discover new websites and find individual pages within websites and intranets. Unless you're listed on the first search engine results page (SERP), you might as well not exist. So, the first duty of writing for the Web is to write to be found.

8. Know your tone

To know your tone, you first have to know who your audience is. Once you know that, talk to them directly (use the word 'you'). Use an active voice, show off your expertise and put yourself in their shoes. Ask yourself: Do they really need or want to know this? If the answer is no, get rid of it. A web writer's job is to not only grab the reader's attention, but keep it.

Are you ready to start your web project?

Do you want to know more?

At Working Design we're ready to help you get started.

Feel free to call us or send an email if you'd like more information.

Here's how to reach us:

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We look forward to hearing from you.