



Your Website Should Make Money

*Improving Website Earning Potentials Through Intelligent
Design and Promotion*

**Written to help small business owners identify,
and correct, problems which interfere with the realization
of realistic earning potentials.**

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A Firelight Web Studio Business Resource
<http://www.firelightwebstudio.com> (Web Services especially for Small Business)
<http://www.betterinstantwebsite.com/> (Fast, Affordable Websites that are NOT Replicated Websites!)
<http://www.ruralblueprint.com/> (Web Services for Small Communities and Non-Profits) (Fast, Affordable
Websites that are NOT Replicated Websites!)

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Dedicated to my family, without whose love and support I can't function!

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We are not tax experts, or legal experts. We advise you to seek further assistance from a professional if you do not feel able to make decisions about difficult issues. We do not assume any risk for your success or failure.

We provide general guidelines to get a business off to an intelligent start, and to avoid some types of problems later on. You are solely responsible for verifying legal requirements for your business, and for timely application for necessary licenses and for payment of taxes.

No business is without risk. Even if you do it right, unforeseen circumstances may intervene with unpredictable results. Starting on firm footing though can help you to make those risks as few and as small as possible. We make every reasonable attempt to help you understand the necessary elements for building that foundation.

Introduction

A business website exists for the purpose of making money. I have heard website designers make the claim:

If you have a business, you need a website.

I cannot agree! In this era of internet information, MOST businesses can BENEFIT from a website. This does not make it necessary, and it does not imply that a website will ALWAYS benefit a business. It is only true if you get the RIGHT website.

To suggest that every business needs a website is ignorant. To believe that having a website instantly makes a business more successful is also ignorant.

In the last year alone, I have encountered many business owners who had a website that functioned, but which did not even pay for itself. They are disillusioned, and discouraged. In every case, a quick review of the site has shown the reasons why it has failed to perform. Those reasons may be technical, aesthetic, or due to lack of professional quality to the site.

Occasionally, the reason for failure to meet expectations is due to unrealistic expectations. Some of those expectations are perpetuated by web designers who fail to educate their clients in the processes of the web. Some are perpetuated by other sources. Amazing potentials ARE there, but they take time and effort to establish the foundation, before they can be realized.

We have produced this guidebook to provide an overview of what realistic expectations are, and to help site owners be able to look at their site in a new way, to pinpoint common reasons why sites fail to monetarily justify their existence. In our experience with site reviews, virtually every site had several of these factors which were not carried out in a way that proved effective. We have tried to include all the major reasons why they do not perform.

It is our hope that you can read through this, and either increase your understanding of how to improve your site, or have a better idea of what specific services you need to hire, and how to find a site designer who is competent to do them – if they understand these issues, your chances are better of having a favorable outcome.

Because with web design, it isn't about cool design, or how badly I want a contract, how much money I want to make, or how many sites I have built. It is about YOUR business. Any web designer that does not understand that their job is to partner with you to help you EARN better, will not be able to understand how to make your site reach your customers.

Some of the issues in this booklet get a little muddled, because many of them intertwine and cross over into other areas. Some of the issues are very subjective also – what is right for one site is dead wrong for another, so it is difficult to formulate rules that are helpful in all situations. It means that sometimes the instructions are more oblique than we'd like them to be!

We have tried to stay as clear as possible, and apologize if any of the content is confusing. As always, if you have questions, you are welcome to email us at techie@adventuretech.us, and we'll be happy to assist you in understanding anything that we did not make clear here.

The Reality of Web Earnings

In some ways, the web is as much a mythical place as Camelot. And people tend to be as unrealistic about what it is, and how to use it! **Even smart people hear the myths so often, and they are perpetuated in such insidious ways, that it is VERY difficult to separate fact from fiction, and to know just what IS possible.** It took me 6 years to learn as much as I have about what is real and what is not. And it was not information that was easy to come by, nor was it cheap. I have made my share of mistakes, and I've learned many lessons the hard way.

Some of the myths are perpetuated by web designers who are more concerned with getting the contract than with taking the time to make it clear just what you are getting for your money. They like the myth that the web is your ticket to fortune, because that keeps their services higher priced. Sometimes it is difficult to know just what is true and what is not, especially when the issues involved are highly technical, and beyond the ability of a business owner (who specializes in their business – and SHOULD specialize in that!) to fully comprehend complex web issues. **You have no choice but to trust someone else to either teach you well, or do the job for you honorably.**

I get asked a lot, “How much should I expect to spend on a website?”. After years of working with shoestring startups, and seeing people with nearly nothing to invest get results from a website, I have come up with the following formula:

If you want to earn \$10,000 from your website in the first year, you should be willing to spend \$5000 in marketing and web design combined. The next year, the costs for site design are reduced, unless you choose to expand. This formula is fully scalable, large or small.

I've seen someone spend very little on a website, and when they earned only double or triple what they put into it that first year, they were disappointed. Spending more is no guarantee of greater earnings, but penny pinching with a website that you expect to be a major vehicle for bringing you income is rather silly. **I fully realize that many business owners have to economize drastically just to get their foot in the door, and I'm not griping about that!** It just bugs me when someone comes to me expecting to make a huge amount of money, when they are unwilling to pay a fair price for what they really want in return. You don't make a fortune from a \$150 website.

If you pay just \$200 for an economy website, and you give it very little in the way of marketing (the great thing about marketing is that you can substitute effective work for monetary investment), then you cannot complain if you make just \$400 from it the first year. If you want something that will return tens of thousands of dollars, then you need to be willing to invest in quality that can actually do that, **or be willing to work hard and be patient while you substitute effort for monetary investment.**

Double or triple return on a website investment is very good, and smart business people will see that. And if a site is built well, with a good product or service behind it, and if it is promoted smart, it can easily do that (under the right conditions, our company even guarantees that, because we know it works when done right). A good designer will contribute hugely to your success, and their expertise deserves respect.

So what is the truth that you most need to know?

Earning online takes time.

- It takes time to build a good site. It can happen in a few weeks, but only if YOU have your part of the job already done (you have to provide information for the pages, provide product lists or service lists, prices, contact and about info, approve the design and finished content, etc). Communication between site builder and site owner can take quite a bit of time, you can lose half a day here, a weekend there, etc, so that the progress is made more slowly than you thought it would be.
- It takes time to get a site indexed with search engines. It always takes at least 2 weeks, far more if you are in a high competition niche, to get ANY search engine traffic at all – and the site cannot be registered until it is complete enough to provide useful information. Usually after it is registered, you'll get

a hint of traffic in about a month, but it can take many months to build up much traffic just from search engines.

- You have to promote your site to get traffic sooner. Even then, if you are using free or low cost methods, it takes lots of time to build momentum, and you have to take action to make it happen.
- If you want traffic fast, you have to pay a lot. And then it still takes time to tweak the site to bring it to it's best earning potential, and time to adjust and test your ads to make sure they are earning at their best.
- You have to maintain a site long term. This takes time or money. A good designer will tell you what will be involved in maintaining your site long term – it differs depending on the site type and function.
- Traffic and income are two different things. GOOD traffic gives you money, poor traffic does not.

And the good news... If it is built right, and you give it what it needs, then it does build momentum, and grows over time.

That is worth having patience with, and working for.

Function and Goals

When a website is not functioning as well as it should, or when you are setting out to avoid disappointments, the process begins with clearly defining the expected function and goals.

A website should DO something that is necessary. A few pages thrown out there that tell no more than a business card, will do nothing. They serve no function.

Site function can be summed up in two concepts:

1. **Most importantly, what value will it have to a site visitor?** What would make them want to find it, and what will make them glad they did?
2. **What do you need the site to do for you?** This comes second, because if you focus on this, and ignore visitor needs, it won't do anything at all for you.

When I talk about a website making money, I don't just mean bringing in revenue directly. There are two ways a site can pay for itself:

1. **By processing orders, generating leads, or encouraging new clients or customers to contact you.** Don't be misled into thinking this happens easily, it doesn't.
2. **By saving you time, or providing a service that you'd have to pay a person to do otherwise.** You can refer leads to it for frequently needed information, dispense documents (applications, spec sheets, employee or downline educational material, etc), or use it for routine customer support needs with a good help system (not to replace personal support, just to reduce the number of calls). When you save time, you save money.

A good website will serve a useful function to both you, and your site visitors. It becomes a virtual member of your business team, another facet in the complex balance of your business, serving vital functions that provide convenience to your customers, and necessary assistance to you. If it does not do that, then it won't earn as you need it to.

In addition to knowing how you need it to function, you need to know what your goals are. I recommend to clients that they base their goals on trends, not on dollar amounts. For example, "I want to see significant evidence of growth potential in six or nine months.", rather than "I want to be earning \$1000 a month from the site within six months." The reason for this is that you can't know exactly what the potential for a site is until it begins to function, and then it may do better or worse than you thought it would. If you can spot trends though, even if they tell you it is going to be a long hard slog to get where you want to go, you can at least see that it CAN get you there. And if it can, it would be silly to give up just because it did not give you what you wanted right away (certainly reassessment and adjustment along the way helps to improve trends).

I spoke with a marketer four months ago, and the first thing he asked me was, "**What do you want to get out of it?**" I thought for a second, and said, "I want people to start calling me instead of having to chase down every contract personally." He replied, "That is an attainable goal." I knew that to attain that goal, I'd have to actually act on specific tasks, or it would not happen.

You need to figure out what the most important thing is that you expect the website to do for you. And it needs to be a realistic goal. I did not want to have people start calling me within a week, I knew that would take time, and that I'd have to keep working it until it did. And it did take some time. But five months later, someone called. And a month after that, someone else called. That was success, and that was the beginning of the realization of that goal.

Usually, if you can achieve a simple goal, then by doing more of what works, and less of what does not, you can achieve additional goals. With a website, that means stating the goal, then writing down a plan of what you will do to achieve it. Then you follow through with the action plan, until you can accurately tell whether it is working or not. **In the web world, that means 3-6 months to see significant indications of results.**

Many of the sites that we see that fail, were not designed with an effective function in mind, and the site

owner's goals were not attainable by the methods they were using. A little revision of the site and the action plan helped to improve the results and trends.

If it isn't working like you feel it ought to, there IS hope!

The Visitor's Point of View

A common failing of both web designers and business owners, in setting up a site, is not considering fully the visitor's point of view. **It isn't just a little thing, it is EVERYTHING.** If your visitor fails to identify with and appreciate your site, it does not matter how much YOU like it. The design can be amazing and the designer proud of it, but if it does not reach the visitor with an effective message that is needed by the visitor, then it is all for nothing.

It isn't about what you, the business owner, wants, or likes. While it is important to build a site that reflects the character of the site owner (an important facet of niche marketing for small businesses), it must be done in a way that appeals to the visitor, otherwise it won't draw good results. Good website design takes the ideas and preferences of the site owner, and presents them in a way that the visitor appreciates. **Most of the time, a business owner knows how to present product in a sales setting.** Successful adaptation of that skill to a web environment is not always obvious and simple, and an effort to do so may lack a single facet that makes it less persuasive than it should have been.

In order to figure out whether or not the site will welcome the visitors, it is first necessary to define who the ideal visitor is. While most customer bases cover a range of people, they will typically share characteristics that can be targeted. For example, my target client is uncertain about web design issues, they are either a first time site owner, a startup business owner, or a successful business owner with a website that is not doing what they need it to do. My clients are often hesitant to trust site designers because they do not know how to tell if someone is being truthful about web issues.

When I build my own website, I build it for those clients. I use simple terms when I can, and present a service that takes care of all the details so they do not end up needing something that was not included. I also provide free educational materials to help them to understand some of the issues for themselves, and I teach them as I present information, so they can feel like I'll teach them how to make good choices while they are in the site development process. All of those specialized services that I provide have to be well presented on my website.

You need to determine some specifics about your customer:

1. Are they highly educated, or do they need a more casual vocabulary?
2. Do they want to know hard facts, or are they more likely to act on emotional impulse?
3. Do they identify with family, business, education, or other backgrounds?
4. Do they need personal contact before they act?
5. Do they need education about your product or service?
6. Are they young, preferring a contemporary presentation, or are they older, and need something more conservative to feel comfortable?

There are other issues also, but you can see that answers to these kinds of questions can make a huge difference in how you present the information on your website. Your ability to accurately identify your target customer's characteristics will help to insure that the site makes them feel at home, and that it provides a familiar feel, and a needed message.

Welcoming a specific visitor base is something that happens through every element of the site, so as you go through the other areas, make sure that each element measures up to the expectations of your site visitors. If it feels familiar, and like someplace they want to be, they are more likely to trust you and do business with you.

Trust

Back in the days when the internet was new, you could slap up a page, offer something for sale, and someone would buy. Things are different today.

Visitors have certain expectations of a website, and meeting those expectations helps them feel like you are professional, helpful, and familiar. With trust and small business relationships, familiarity is a huge thing – if your site feels familiar and they can find things where they expect to, and the information they want is readily accessible, then you've begun to forge a long term reciprocal relationship with them.

If your site is awkward, and your information hard to find, and the expected validation info is nowhere to be seen, they will feel like you are shifty, inexperienced, or untrustworthy. That translates into a lost sale.

Some common expectations of visitors to your site are:

1. **Understandable product descriptions**, which include necessary performance specs and details.
2. **About Us, and Contact Us info**, placed in an expected area (links at the top or bottom of the page, or at the bottom of your product or service links). They want to know who you are and how to reach you.
3. **Clearly posted prices.**
4. **Clearly posted and reasonable support and guarantee policies.** Also, shipping policies, return policies, and privacy policies, if they apply to your business.
5. **Easy navigation** (covered in detail in the navigation section).
6. **A professional site design, that works predictably.** It does not need to be elaborate, it DOES have to work!

Think about how you react when you come into a site, and find things that are confusing, misplaced, or completely missing. Do you want your customer to act that way?

Web standards and styles have changed in the last few years also. Business sites that looked like personal sites used to be acceptable, but they are not now. The expectation of professionalism is a lot higher now than it used to be, and people will assume that if you cannot afford to hire a designer – or to do a quality job yourself – that you are not successful at business. And they like to patronize successful businesses.

The same issue holds with free web space. Someone else's ads on your product or service sales site is not good. It makes you look desperate. Lack of a true domain also makes you look cheap – **after all, a domain name only costs about \$9 a year. Good hosting costs less than \$10 a month, so if your business is making anything at all, or if you expect it to, then it is a reasonable expense, and a necessary one.**

It isn't all about money, and it isn't all about hiring someone to do it for you. It just means that if you do it yourself, you need to be prepared to spend a lot of time learning about it, and be willing to take criticism so you can improve it and make it work well. Web design is now a highly complex field, with many areas of sub-specialty. It takes years to learn, layer on layer, to develop the proficiency to build a site that functions flawlessly all the way around.

When you hire someone, and you have a tight budget, you need to make sure they are making cost cutting economies in areas where it won't hurt your site's ability to do what you need it to do right now. That means they won't try to sell you on a 3 page "business card" site (which will not help your business and may hurt it), they won't take shortcuts with the basic essential elements, and won't waste time or money on fluff at the expense of core function. **Because it is a certainty that if they make the wrong cost containment choices, it will affect your visitor's trust level on the site.**

Web builders are not capable of leveling the playing field either, they produce templates that do not reflect the character of your business, and which are not in any way unique. The sites are also typically slow, inflexible, and LOOK like they were produced by a web builder.

Not all business owners will be able to quickly learn the basics – or they may feel it frustrates them so

badly that it is not worth it to them. For those who can learn these skills, it takes time, and good instructions.

Sadly, most of the problems with trust issues in a site are created by web designers who charged the site owner for the work. Many are caused by do it yourself site owners who simply did not have the time to learn everything at once (no criticism there!), but given the time it takes to learn the skills, it is understandable. Web designers, though, ought to know better!

One reason we created this book is so business owners would be able to spot issues more easily themselves, whether they are doing it themselves, or whether they are hiring someone. **Business owners who understand basic issues with web design are empowered, and do not need to be held hostage by problems that they do not know how to spot.**

A business owner SHOULD specialize in their business. But they need to know enough about what makes good design to be able to insure that their site welcomes and reassures the visitor, and presents a virtual business presence that is persuasive and effective in increasing revenue.

Simplicity and Efficiency

Two rules can sum up this chapter:

Do not make things more complicated than they have to be.

Do not waste your visitor's time with unnecessary pages, elements that do not work, or features that are awkward to use.

Flash animations, video, sound, and complex coding that adds glitz to the page is almost always unnecessary. There are very few sites where those features enhance the site without having a negative effect that outweighs the benefit. They are only appropriate where the business is highly contemporary, the majority of site visitors using newer computers and high speed internet, and where there is a healthy budget to support them (high end or complex features invariably cost more initially, make it more expensive to market the site, and then cost more to maintain).

Most of the time, a simple, attractive design, which functions predictably, with simple coding and familiar navigation will get you further than a site with cool features which slow down the site and annoy the visitors.

Simplicity is also the key to cost containment for businesses on a strict budget. **Simplicity does NOT mean it is not professional!** In fact, simple sites can be quite elegant, and can contain a high degree of professionalism.

When site options are being considered, it is wise to choose the least complicated method of achieving a satisfactory result. Generally, the more complicated the plan, the more expense is involved, and the more things can go wrong with it. Choosing simple solutions costs less in the short term, takes less long term maintenance, and is almost always more predictable and functional for the visitor.

This is not to say that complex features are not ever needed. They can be, but they are not usually necessary for the average small business. And for those who DO need them, they often need just a single high end feature set, and not the same kind of solutions that large corporations use. **Website features are scalable to any level of need, and good assessment at the outset of what you need now, and where you are going, will keep your site working well, without undue annoyances.**

I've been on sites that wasted my time with Flash intros that told me nothing, home pages that said nothing but "click to enter" (I already DID that!), and useless pages in the site that had no real reason for their existence. I've used search functions that failed to return a single useful result (and these were not mom and pop sites either, they are sites that are major information sources getting millions of hits per month). I visited a major chain store site once where the menu rolled off below the bottom of the screen, and the designer had put in a "no scroll" command so I could not even SEE the other options. Every single one of them earned a fervent promise on my part to NEVER go back!

Some mistakes occur because the designer and owner view the site on large monitors with fast internet, and never consider how it might function on lesser equipment. Some occur because some designers think that newer and more complex is always better – and some occur because someone just learned a new trick and wants to show it off.

Many errors in function happen from using templates that are old and outdated, or which were created without actual practicality in mind. FrontPage templates were notorious for producing badly functioning sites. Some DreamWeaver templates are also full of unnecessary features which fail to work correctly in the variety of situations that they are needed in.

People really do appreciate a fast, efficient site, more than a cumbersome, awkward, badly functioning one. **If you make it easy for them to get what they want, they'll stick around and come back.** If you annoy them, they won't, unless they have absolutely no other choice (and then you have an angry customer!).

Keep it simple, and keep it predictably functional. It will save you more, and earn you more.

Design and Page Layout Issues

Good design is often not the site that makes people say “wow”. In fact, the most common comment I get on my sites is, “It was well organized, efficient, and easy to find what I wanted.” Not that awesome graphics and creativity aren’t appreciated, just that if you have to choose between eye candy and intelligent design, take the intelligence!

Design and Page Layout go hand in hand. **With web design, graphical elements, text, navigation, and other bits of information and content have to be organized on a page in a way that makes sense.** Navigation is covered in more depth in another chapter, but it does sort of blend into this topic as well.

Traditional page layout techniques have been adapted to the web, and some of the same terms are now used as in the publishing field. For practical purposes, there are three major rules about page layout that will help you to insure that your site welcomes instead of repelling, and draws people in instead of confusing them:

1. **Most important information goes in the upper left.** That is where people look first. They also expect to find your most important links in a business site on the left side, or across the top. The upper left quarter of the page should contain the thing you want them to see and understand first.
2. **The pages should contain enough information “above the fold” for the visitor to tell what the site (if it is the home page) or page (for interior pages) is about.** The expression “above the fold” refers to the part of the site they will see BEFORE they scroll down. Scrolling down is fine, but the part they see first should give them enough to know whether they SHOULD scroll down, and what they are likely to find if they do. Use this space wisely, you only get one chance with it!
3. **It is ok to have a site that has lots of information, but it is NOT ok to have a cluttered and confusing site.** If you have a ton of information, it must be organized well, and arranged in a way that is pleasing to the eye, as well as logical to follow.

Design is also as much an issue of logical and pleasing arrangement with web design, as it is of cool graphics. The right graphics can take a site from mediocre to amazing, but even average graphics won't be a detriment to a site that is otherwise professionally laid out – bad ones (blurry, lacking needed detail or impact) will hurt it though.

Coordinated colors, and good use of color is a great enhancement to a site. It doesn't matter whether it is highly colored, or mostly white, as long as the color scheme is well coordinated, and as long as it suits the topic and target audience. **We have found that good color coordination is perhaps one of the main elements in taking a site from “not quite right but I don’t know why”, to “Ooooh. I like that!”.** Colors include backgrounds, fonts, graphical elements, even the photos used in the site.

Colors have a meaning, but that meaning often depends on the context in which they are used. The important thing is, the right colors for your business and for your target market, combined together in a way that welcomes and appeals, is one of the important things in good design, and also affects the perception of trust. Because if they feel “right” to the visitor, they are more likely to trust you.

Red is often used to emphasize. We have discovered that the RIGHT color of red for your site takes it from glaring and obnoxious contrast, to an attention getter that nevertheless coordinates with the feel and design of the site. Darken it, or push it a little into the blue or brown spectrum, or lighten it a little, to make it fit with your color scheme.

A good design should also have a coordinated style. It does not matter so much WHAT the style is, as long as the message it sends is consistent with your business message, and as long as it all works together to deliver the SAME message.

Many times, the difference between a site that doesn't quite work as intended, and one that pops together, is a small thing – a single color, a single element, a tweak to a graphic, a small change to the arrangement of things.

One of the key differences between a truly professional designer, and an amateur is that a pro never

becomes attached to an idea. They understand that a concept that sounds good on the phone may not be able to be carried out with the necessary effectiveness when it is actually attempted. They are not afraid to scrap and entire design if it just is not working. **Sometimes the part you like the most is the part that does not really work in the overall scheme. Let it go, and move on.** Focus on making the WHOLE thing work, and not on staying within confines of preferences that hamper your ability to have a site that really works in every way. Because once again, it is not about what YOU like, it is about what WORKS.

Design issues are also sometimes affected by technical issues which are not readily apparent until you study web design a little. **Large graphics are slow to load.** Saving them in a compressed format helps make them smaller, but even highly compressed, larger graphics can cause problems that a new designer may not realize are a problem.

Use of GIF animations should be conservative. The general rule is one per page, but if you have a very long page, you can use more than one, but only if no more than one is showing on the screen at one time (as you scroll down the page). **GIF animations should also be slowed down – rates that are too fast, or colors that flash too intensely will distract, annoy, and can even (in some situations) trigger seizures in sensitive people (no exaggeration!).** If your animation has words, make sure the frame rate is set so that you can comfortably read them in between frames.

Javascript rollovers and Flash buttons are also problematic, require extra coding and graphics that take more time to download, and rarely truly add something meaningful to a site. Usually if you eliminate them, you can use an alternate that is faster, more efficient, and far easier to maintain long term. **Keep it simple is also a cardinal rule for great design.**

Remember, the best site designs rarely win awards. In fact, if the customer thinks about it at all, it will be to think, “oh, nice... it works!”. But usually the best site designs just feel right, so much so that the customer never even thinks about it – and when it is that comfortable, they don't hesitate much before they click the “buy” button either.

Great sites don't wow people, they just quietly perform their job – welcoming people in and giving them what they want, while you get what you want, too.

Content Presentation

Content presentation involves placement, formatting, and quality. Content is the meat and potatoes of your site – it's reason for being. Presenting it in an effective way is very important.

We'll tackle the issues one at a time:

Professionalism and Quality – Good grammar, correct spelling, and clear and concise wording is important. You need to give complete descriptions of things that matter, and you need to get to the point, and not waste your visitor's time with excess verbiage, superfluous images (or bad images), or sound loops that they cannot turn off. Quality is hard to define, but when we see it, we know it!

- **Your entire site needs to present a single message in the content** – whatever the purpose of your site is, there should be a feel for that throughout the site.
- **You need to show some style in your content.** This is another place to display personality. A distinctive style helps to set you apart from the masses, and gives it extra panache.
- **If you are presenting information, you need to have an opinion.** The same old bland info that is found elsewhere gives your site no new value. Be distinctive and you'll attract people who have a similar outlook.
- **Something unique.** You can do the same thing as someone else, as long as you present it in a way that sets it apart. You can sell the same products, but you have to have SOMETHING that helps the visitor want to buy from you instead of from the dozens of others just like you.
- **If video or flash animations are needed for your content, make them optional, not required.** About half the US alone is still using Dialup, and those elements are painfully slow for them.
- **Professional content presentation is straightforward, and concise.** It is efficient, and does not waste time, and it is self-explanatory.

Placement – Back in the Page Layout chapter, we discussed putting the most important things above the fold, and the left upper quadrant as being the Hot Spot on the page – where you put the things they need most. Beyond that, you need to position your content in a way that makes sense.

- **Images that go with text should be near the text.** Images should also coordinate with the message of the site.
- **You can use the sidebars for information,** but it should be secondary or “afterthought” information.
- **Text boxes and other elements should be arranged in a balanced and pleasing arrangement,** without chaos. The cluttered look is not fashionable, nor is it functional.
- **Pages should not be longer than they need to be** – generally three screen heights is a good average to aim for – longer pages are ok when necessary for the topic, or when it cannot be easily broken down into logical segments, but a home page with ads and stuff scrolling down forever is NOT ok! Page length is, in fact, more of an issue with a home page than with any other pages in the site.

Formatting – The web has changed the way information is presented. The words are often still the same, but the way in which the words are displayed has changed. Color, positioning, text size, and font styles are used more creatively online, and the whole process of reading is much more visually active than it used to be.

- **Use color to draw attention to the important parts.** You'll want to bold the colored letters if you are using them for emphasis, since most colors show up better that way. Make sure the colors coordinate with your site style.
- **Use bolding to emphasize single words, single sentences that are key thoughts, or items that are most critical.** You can use bolding to direct an impatient person through the page, helping them pick up the most important points.
- **Bullet lists, and numbered lists can highlight important groups of thoughts.** This page shows an example of using bullet lists to group related concepts together.
- **Use containers to separate self-contained concepts which need to appear alongside or in between other things.** These can be ads, notices, announcements, tech notes, anecdotes, etc. You can use a subtly different background color for the box, or put a border around it to make it distinctive.

- **Don't use more than about 3-4 colors, and no more than about 3 font sizes per page.** Too much and it will look cluttered.
- **Avoid using flashing or scrolling text, except for SHORT phrases, or a single word.** Scrolling text is most appropriately used at the BOTTOM of a page, not the top, and should NEVER be used in essential slogans, titles, or keyword phrases. Flashing text should only be used as an attention getter for a SINGLE item on a page, such as a "NEW!" alert, or something similar. It should then be set to flash at a slower rate so it is not disturbing (this, again, is something that can trigger seizures, and cause thought pattern disturbances at a very deep level). Most of the time, choosing a color and bolding a phrase can achieve the same thing with fewer problems.

There are many "right" ways to present content. The important thing is not looking for the perfect solution, but in working out a presentation that suits YOUR topic and market. As long as it all works together for your target market, then it is right.

Page Focus

In general, each page in a website needs to have a distinct focus – a reason for being. And it needs to be just ONE reason, unless there simply is not enough important information to fill an entire page (in which case you can combine two or three topics). There is a balance between useless pages that should be consolidated, and huge pages that should be segmented.

You gain powerful advantages by good focal content on each page. If the pages are organized well, and your topics well divided, it makes more sense to people. For example, if you are presenting hats, then you'd want a page for business hats, a page for fun hats, a page for sports hats, a page for women's hats, a page for baby hats, etc.

This tactic does not just help people find what they want more easily, it also helps your site get better search engine traffic. Search engines like a page that has a clear topic, and then related content through the page, whether it is an information site, product site, or service site. The majority of your site traffic may in fact come into your site through pages other than your home page, so making the pages focused on a single topic or concept, or facet of your product line, can help to draw more traffic in the first place, and then to help them know they got the right thing once they are there.

It can take a lot of practice to logically divide information into segments, but once you get the hang of it, the same tactic works for instruction manuals, employee handbooks, product brochures, and other printed literature, so it is a skill worth learning.

I've been doing this kind of information organization for so long that it is now second nature to me. In fact, when I build a site, I actually outline the information for the site as I am building it. **But most people can be greatly benefited by using an outline to break things into logical titles, and then arrange them into the right order.** More information related to this in in the Site Organization and Navigation section.

When you segment information, you also have to choose a logical name for it. That name should be the phrase or description that will MOST LIKELY occur to someone if they go looking for it. It should be a name that immediately tells the visitor what that page is about.

The first paragraph on the page should sum up the most important message that you want the visitor to know. And it should have a word or two in it that echoes the page name. Sometimes there are reasons why this rule is not followed, such as when you are drawing the reader in with an analogy or evocative mood setter. Most of the time though, it is part of getting to the point, and being courteous to your site visitors.

The only page in the site that does not require highly focused information is the Home page. By its nature, it has to be more generalized. But it should still concentrate on the key points, with the most important thing in the spotlight. It should be clear from the home page whether or not the visitor is likely to find what they want if they click a link.

Good topical focus in your site helps your visitors feel like you are more considerate, and more professional.

Site Layout and Navigation

I think that site navigation and layout came naturally to me, so it has been difficult for me to teach other people just what the principles were. **Site layout is not PAGE layout – the organization of information on a single page – it is the organization of all the pages of information through the site. Site organization is achieved through page topical focus, and navigation.**

Navigation is how we access the pages, and how the means of accessing them is organized. Navigation becomes part of the individual page layout, and part of how your information is organized on each page.

I did say in the intro that these topics overlapped and that sometimes it was a bit muddled! Now that I have thoroughly confused you, let's see if I can make it a bit clearer.

A website is not like a book – a book has a table of contents, and then it progresses in a linear fashion through each chapter.

Imagine that the book had a table of contents on every page, and that the book cover stayed visible across the top of the book, while you progressed from chapter to chapter. Once you start changing the way a book works, you also have to change some of the ways that the information is organized.

When you write a book, you make an outline first. You write down the chapters you want to write, and if any of your topics break down into sub-topics, you might have sections in the book, and chapters within those sections. **In a book, you still have to make them linear, but in a website, you can make them multi-dimensional.**

From the home page of the site, a visitor should be able to access all of the top level (most important) categories of content in your site. **It does not matter whether it is a store, or an infosite, or a virtual office for services. If you offer five categories of service, they'd better all be accessible from the home page, along with other expected information (contact, about, and policies).** This means it is very easy to run out of space if you have a limited navigation design to your site.

You can diagram out your site structure like a family tree. The home page goes to all of these pages, and these pages go to the next layer of pages, etc. Once you have it diagrammed out, you have to figure out a neat and tidy way to put the links to the pages into a functional structure that is easy for the site visitor to figure out.

Fortunately, there are some standard ways of doing this. Probably the most popular is a three column site, with the option for up to four navigation areas:

1. **A horizontal bar** – this can be near the top (over or under the header), or at the bottom of the page, or both. Remember, top of the page says, "I know you want this information, so I am putting it where you can easily find it." Bottom of the page says, "We didn't think this was as important, but we knew you'd want it, so we put it where you'd eventually find it." (unless you have the same links top AND bottom, in which case it is just an extra courtesy to have it at the bottom). This is a common place to put SITE related links (as opposed to INFORMATION related links. Such links include Home, About, Contact, Email, Policies, Submit an Item, Support, Guarantee Policies, etc. Information that has to be there, but which is not part of the informational content or product or service offerings.
2. **The left hand navigation** – If you use left navigation, you ALWAYS use it for the direct site content – that means your product catalog, service listing, topical information, etc. Organize it from most important, to least important, top to bottom, or in alphabetical order. Make it make sense. If this is the only nav bar you use, then put Home at the top, and all of your Site related links at the bottom of the list.
3. **Right hand navigation** – This is for "afterthought information" unless it is your only nav bar. If you do not have a left nav bar, then use this one the same as a single left bar. If you do have a left bar, then use it for secondary information. Links with photos to specials, related site links, secondary information which does not fit on the left bar but which you want to have accessible from every page, etc.
4. **Nested Nav Box** – You can add a secondary nested navigation box for sub-category navigation, either at the top of every page, beside the right navigation box, or just as plain text links at the top or bottom of the page. You can also add them as indented links under the appropriate link in the primary navigation bar.

Now, there are other ways to do navigation, and there is no real right or wrong rules about which type is best. There IS a rule that helps you know whether you got it right though!

No Mystery Meat Navigation (this is the term used for mystifying navigation by the owner of Websites that Suck).

This means two things:

1. **Make it clear where your navigation links are.** Do not hide them under obscure photos, or hieroglyphs. Make sure they are clearly labeled.
2. **Do not use obscure names for them.** Now, sometimes on a “fun” site, you can get creative with link naming, but for the most part, with a serious business site, get to the point, be lucid and clear about just what is behind the link! If it is for wide shoes, say “wide shoes”.

When you need to group certain links together to make them more logical, you can put a text header above a group of them – they can be contained in a box, or not, according to your design preference. This works well for sites with a limited number of top level categories, with few enough sub-topics to easily list all on the home page.

There are a few other rules about navigation:

1. **Use the same standard throughout your site.** If your site has subsections with topics that are fairly different, that each have a different design, it is ok to have a separate navigation standard for each interior section, but otherwise, stick to a single navigation scheme throughout the site. Do NOT make your audience figure out where things are more than once.
2. **Be creative if you want to, but do not sacrifice intuitiveness.** It is better that your visitors can easily figure it out. Unoriginal and functional beats creative and confusing any day.
3. **Generally search engines do not like more than about 100 links total per page.** 50 links in a series of related items in a single column is about the maximum you want to have in one place. More than that, break them up, sub-categorize, or reorganize.
4. **Never create a page with a dead-end.** Make sure there is a way to get back to where they were before. It is polite to make sure they can also get to the next thing that is likely to interest them.

Neat, well ordered navigation, with logical link names will help you with search engine optimization also – search engines pay attention to link names, and they can help you get better traffic. Good site layout that puts things where they are easy to find, means that search engines can find them easily too.

Site layout and navigation work together to make your site either easy or difficult for visitors to find what they want. Poorly done, and it will confuse them and drive them way in frustration. Done well, it invites them in and helps them feel you know your business.

Speed

In our day of ever increasing internet speeds, some people feel that website speed issues are an obsolete concern. As long as 50% or more of your site viewers are using dial-up, speed issues are very much a significant issue in designing efficient and effective websites.

Site speed is an issue, because if you use coding or site elements that cause annoyance to your visitors, it is not a good thing. This is more of an issue for some sites than for others.

If you cater to contemporary techies, then chances are, your audience will be predominantly high speed internet users.

If you cater to frugal visitors, older people, less technically skilled users, people who are not highly internet savvy, or people who live in remote areas, then chances are, you'll have a higher number of users who are browsing with older equipment, and slower service.

On average though, you can figure 40-60% of your site visitors will use dial-up. That means these issues are very pertinent to providing them with a good site experience.

Every single item that you put on a web page takes time to move from the server, to the desktop computer. The larger the file for the item, the slower it will happen. And each picture, sound, video, animation, javascript button, or bit of bloated code that your page contains, is counted separately.

These are the most common reasons for speed hits, and what you can do about them:

1. **Big graphics.** Graphics that are large in size, or that do not use efficient compression, will take extra long to download. Graphic size is measured not just by visual size, but by FILE size. A program like Adobe Photoshop Elements can help you to reduce the file size (use the Save for Web command), and to see what the various quality options will give you, and what the resulting file size will be. Graphics over about 50 k are going to cause problems if you have several of them on a page. Crop out parts that are not needed, and scale your images down to the smallest size that will still have the needed impact and detail to serve your purpose.
2. **Flash Animations and Buttons.** These suckers are HUGE. They take several minutes to download, while you sit watching a progress meter or timer. The rule for Flash is, do not use it unless it TRULY adds something needed to your site, AND you have an audience that will appreciate it. Flash buttons are pretty much useless, you can achieve the same thing with simpler and more predictable coding. Another option is to offer a non-Flash option for slower connections.
3. **Code Bloat.** This is caused by using software that writes cumbersome code instead of efficient code – MS Office is notorious for this, but any software that is not designed specifically for writing HTML code (as it's primary function) will produce bad code. Site builders also produce poor code. This can actually be an extreme problem, with site files being 3-5 times the size (in kilobytes) as what they need to be. Code written by bad software also is very flaky, and it does not perform reliably in browsers.
4. **Javascript.** Many things that use Javascript can be written in CSS, and done more efficiently. Other things done in Javascript are either not necessary (adding nothing to the value or function of the site), or they can be done in simpler ways. If you have it in your site, make sure it is truly needed.
5. **Sounds.** Sounds take FOREVER to download, and often your visitors have moved on to another site by the time it would take your sound to download, so they don't hear it anyway. Worse, when they DO hear it, the prevalent reaction is not one of appreciation, but of annoyance. Professional sites simply do not use background sound loops, and those that use recorded messages have the option of switching them off.
6. **Movies.** These should ALWAYS be optional. Some users simply cannot access them at all due to the time it takes to download them. If you provide critical information in a movie format, then PLEASE provide a transcript so that those who cannot see your movie can actually use your site and benefit from it.
7. **Graphic intensive pages.** Gallery pages are the standard online now, and for good reason. If you have pages with tons of large images, they will take too long to download. So the solution is to put thumbnail shots on a page (9-12 of them), and link each of those to a larger image. This gives your visitor the

option of looking at the ones that they are interested in. Slideshows should also be optional, because they take a long time to load.

8. **Unnecessary dynamic features.** Dynamic sites (php, perl, and asp) are always slower than plain HTML sites. This is because the user gives information to the server, and the server builds the page fresh for each user. Some forms of coding are far slower than others. Do not use complex coding when a simpler site type will work just as well. If you have to use dynamic pages, make sure they fulfill a necessary function.

I am sure that as internet speeds continue to increase, that programmers, designers, and web techies will come up with ever more demanding ways to use our bandwidth. Just because they CAN. We are now in the middle of a radical transition to exponentially higher speeds, but I am sure that this euphoric state of feeling like speed issues are not a concern will be short lived. By this time next year it is certain that high speed internet users will be complaining about new demands on their download time. Not only will more demanding programming come into play, but we are now dealing with a more impatient crowd – we KNOW what fast internet is, we will not easily accept even thirty second downloads, when we were willing to accept 45 seconds on dial-up. We like our speed, and will not easily relinquish it!

Right now though, in the age of transition, be considerate of browsers that are forced into a slower mode of viewing. You may never know who they are if you are not considerate of them.

Niche Appeal

Many sites that we review have nothing unique about them – no value, no reason for existence. I think that “Work at Home Directory” sites are perhaps the worst violators of the originality rules, but there are many sites which contain nothing worth coming back to.

If I do a net search, and find 50 substantially identical websites, what is to compel me to use one instead of the other? This issue is perhaps even more extreme with distributor sites, because you are selling identical products, so you have to find some other way to differentiate yourself. When there is nothing different between products, it happens in your words, your site design and overall message, your experience, your willingness to be accessible, and in your helpfulness.

Something about your site needs to be unique, and something about it needs to be appealing. It can be a different way of providing a service, it can be uncommon payment terms, it can be unique products, or it can be the way in which you sell them. Perhaps you display a sense of humor through your site that makes some people enjoy shopping there. Perhaps you explain confusing things in a way people can understand. Perhaps you have better product details or photos on your site than the competition. It just has to be something that your target market will appreciate, that you do, that they cannot find easily anywhere else.

The internet has opened up a worldwide marketplace. That means no matter where you live, you have an opportunity to carve out a slice of the world revenue share, and craft a stable business. **But with all that opportunity, came greater competition.** You are now not only marketing to the whole world, you are COMPETING with the whole world. That means you really have to find a way to access those people for whom your business will be the best fit. It is a lot harder than picking teams on the playground where all you had to do is wave your hand and say, “Pick me, pick me!”

Niche appeal is not just one thing you do on your site. It consists of determining just what DOES make your business different, and then insuring that this most important message is apparent in every element of your site.

If you are presenting yourself as a caring counselor, you want to build a site presence that is approachable, considerate, and that has evidence of gentleness.

If you are presenting yourself as professional and innovative, then your site needs to reflect those qualities in the words, images, arrangement, navigation, and details.

If you are promoting yourself as accessible in a market that typically is not, then you need to BE accessible, and it needs to be visible on every page of your site.

Your niche should be an integral part of your slogan and marketing messages. Your entire site needs to echo that message, and emphasize it. This can set you apart at first glance, and welcome a visitor to whom your focus is important, even if they have not really identified for themselves that it IS important to them.

So think about the question, “Why should they buy from ME, specifically?” Then see if the answer is subtly evident from any perspective in your site.

Cohesiveness

After all the elements of your site is in place, take a good hard look at it, and ask yourself if everything coordinates together, and if all of the elements present a single, targeted message.

Cohesiveness is another thing that is sort of hard to define, but you know it when you see it. And it is absolutely essential to creating a site that is professional and which serves its purpose to the fullest.

When someone comes into your site, they will usually not notice the design overmuch, nor will they even give a thought to efficient navigation or good text, unless it annoys them, or happens to engender a strong positive feeling. Usually though, great design ends up feeling neutral and invisible to the site visitor. This means it is familiar to them, expected, and transparent. It becomes like going to Wal-Mart – they don't think about the floor tiles and the produce arrangement, it just IS, and they can find what they want, so they leave happy.

If something is not quite right about the site though, perhaps a color does not blend as it should, or a graphic sends a confusing message, or the navigation takes too long to figure out, then they'll feel uncomfortable just long enough to feel cautious about trusting you. Sometimes they cannot even pinpoint WHAT makes them feel that way, or even that they DO feel that way. They just know they feel like they did not find QUITE what they were looking for, so they go find it somewhere else. Such decisions are most often made in the subconscious, without the visitor even being fully aware of how or why they were made. Aware or not though, they'll leave, and you'll lose the sale.

Every element in your site matters: Writing, graphics, design style, layout, site organization, formatting, link names, etc, all needs to have the same kind of feel – warm, professional, academic, casual, formal, childlike, gentle, firm, fun, humorous, lighthearted, whatever. And the feel needs to be in harmony with your business type, your manner of doing business, and your primary marketing messages.

A site should also have a design theme that is consistent and coordinated throughout the entire site.

Sometimes when you combine a shopping cart with info pages, it can be extremely difficult to match the designs exactly between two systems, but it is always possible to coordinate them using the same colors, similar design elements, matching fonts, and a similar layout that shares ease of use features. People don't mind differences from page to page, as long as the items they need to find can be found in approximately the same place, and as long as it is completely apparent that they are still on the same site. The two areas should also send a unified marketing message.

With virtually every site we have designed, we have worked through a design process, which involved testing colors, different header looks, different graphic accents, page accents and text formatting. Typically it looks “ok”, for a long time, getting better and better, until we finally make one final tweak, which makes us go, “Yeah!”.

Search Engine Optimization

There is an attitude that Search Engine Optimization has to be a horrid complex thing that is too technical for real people to attempt. This isn't actually true, and as long as you understand what it really is, you can do the most important things without any particular skills other than the ability to think like your site visitors.

The first goal with any site is good content. With Search Engines, WRITTEN content has a higher value than images or sounds, or other digital elements which search engines cannot interpret. Words, they can almost make sense of. Everything else is just digital noise.

The first rule of SEO, is:

Build your site for PEOPLE first. If you write good text, and create a good site that people can understand and appreciate, then search engines are more likely to like it too.

When you make pages better for search engines, or people, this is called “optimizing” the pages or the site. Optimizing just means making it work better.

What search engines like, is “relevant” content. That means, when someone does a net search, they want to be able to give the searcher something that fits what they are looking for. So search engine companies have developed complex programming routines to judge, by words, placements, and emphases on your pages, what is relevant, and what is not. These routines are referred to as “algorithms” by techies, which is just a confusing way of saying that the formulas use are mathematical in nature.

Now, PEOPLE want relevant content too. And your goal is to satisfy people. So when you understand that the goal of Search Engines is NOT to trick you into losing traffic, or to require you to do highly complex things in order to compete, but that THEIR goal and YOUR goal is the same (to bring people to your site who are LOOKING for stuff on your site), then you can make sure your SEO efforts are rooted in ACCURACY, not tricks. When you do that, everybody wins, you most of all, because accuracy is precisely the goal of search engine companies.

Optimizing your pages will help you to get more free traffic, and those visitors will be more interested in what you have on your site.

So, what do you DO to optimize your site?

- 1. Good site structure helps pages be found easily.**
- 2. Good page focus helps search engines index interior pages more accurately.**
- 3. Well written and well worded content helps search engines (and people) know what your pages are really about.**
- 4. A good title tag (a piece of code that creates the title that displays in the title bar of your browser window) helps to emphasize the most important topics on the page.** At first, if you have the same title tag through each page in your site, that will be better than none, but later (when you have time to go through the site page by page), you'll want to give each page a unique title tag.
- 5. Good Keyword and Description metatags (more code bits) help to reinforce what the key words and topics are on the page.** You can use the same shortcut to begin with as you do with a title tag – use the same keyword and description tags on every page. Later, it helps to make them more targeted to each page.
- 6. Alt tags on the images (still more code) help the search engines to know what images are about when the images are an important part of the message of the site,** plus they help people to know what the image means if it does not load correctly (or if they have visual problems).
- 7. Carefully thought out keyword and keyphrase usage in your title tag, description metatag, alt tags, and page text headings, as well as on your links, and the first text paragraphs in your page, can help to reinforce the message to people and search engines.**

What do you NOT want to do when you optimize a site?

1. **Do NOT overuse keywords!** Use them in a natural way, and do not repeat them excessively.
2. **Do not repeat keywords in title tags** unless it is natural to do so.
3. **Keep your keyword metatag list down to 20 keywords or less** – stick to the important stuff.
4. **Do not make your title tag too long** – 5-10 words at most, SHORTER is better.
5. **Do not make alt tags too long** – same rule as title tag.
6. **Do not use hidden links or hidden text on your page** (invisible images, or text that is the same color as your page).
7. **Do not use any tactic that aims to trick search engines** into giving you more traffic.
8. **Do not worry and fuss about technical issues.** Seriously. Search engines do not penalize you for being technically unskilled, so if you do not use mod rewrite on a php driven site, they are not going to penalize you for not knowing what the heck mod rewrite is or what to do with it.

You may hear a lot more complex stuff about SEO. Don't worry about the time consuming and highly complex stuff. You see, search engine optimization has two facets that many people do not understand:

1. **The most effective things that are going to make the biggest difference are the simple, logical things that almost anyone can do, if they can write well.** Truly! The other things are things that are pretty complex, and only make the tiniest percentage of difference. Fine if you are a huge corporation with massive resources, but impractical for a small company (the breakpoints for corporations are different than the breakpoints for small businesses or shoestring startups).
2. **No one is really an expert.** Search engine companies keep some rules hidden on purpose, to keep unscrupulous people from manipulating the engines. And many SEO firms will never test some strategies in an objective way, because to do so would risk hurting the ratings. Lastly, sites are so different, and so many things can affect traffic, that it is almost impossible to isolate a single tactic as having been the one that did the damage. So when you focus on ACCURATE presentation of information, you won't go wrong, because you and the search engines have the same goal.

Do the stuff that matters most, and then move on to more important things. Search engine optimization is only part of the equation for getting good traffic, so do what is logical, and then focus on marketing strategies that will get you more traffic than fussing over little things that won't matter much.

Good basic SEO can make a difference in how much traffic you get, and is worth doing right. But beyond the basics, you do not need to worry until you know you can afford \$20,000 to have an SEO specialization firm go through your site and focus on tiny tweaks that may give you just a small increase in traffic or profit percentages.

Effective Marketing

Good marketing is not just about getting traffic to a website. It is about increasing revenue. Fail in that, and you wasted time and money.

Good marketing is ALWAYS either expensive, or time consuming – low cost marketing falls in the middle between costly and free marketing. This is an absolute rule you can depend on, and use as a yardstick to measure tactics by. If someone promises you fast and cheap marketing, they are lying to you.

So what makes marketing good?

Good marketing puts an effective message in front of people who are interested in what you are selling.

There are two parts to that:

1. **An effective marketing message.** This filters through your entire website, and through each ad that you write. They all have to have a unified message, or you'll attract a different kind of person than you really want, and that won't help you.
2. **It reaches people who are interested in it.** That means you are advertising in places where there is likely to be a high number of people who meet your target market profile.

Advertising can be said to have two approaches:

- **The Shotgun approach:** You blast ads out there hoping that one of them hits someone who is actually interested. It is usually very cheap to do this, but it is also not very effective. If you market to mothers with small babies, and you are blasting ads to all and sundry, then only about 1% or less of the people who hear your ad will be within your target market. Sometimes this is the only way to reach a specific market (like radio ads for a local market), but with marketing online, there is almost always a way to target it.
- **The Sharpshooter approach:** You find places where a high number of your prospects hang out, and you get your ad in there. This has two advantages – it reaches the people who are most likely to be interested, and it gives you a little bit of a recommendation from the place where they are hanging out. For example, if you are targeting moms with small babies, and you advertise in a “new moms” site, then you are advertising to people who fit your customer profile, plus visitors who like the site will associate you with that site (because they saw your ad there), which helps them be more willing to trust you. This approach generally costs many times more than untargeted advertising (or takes more time), but the ads are far higher quality, and more likely to turn into purchases.

Now, a bit about “internet marketing”. Internet marketing is a term that is used to describe ONE internet arena only:

How to sell information products to people, and to encourage them to make impulse buys.

It is not good for ANYTHING else! It does not work for anything else. People who sell “Internet Marketing” materials through “one page websites” do not tell you that they have NO CLUE how to sell shipped products, or services, or how to promote quality information. They do one thing, which relies on dishonesty to work, and they do NOT know HOW to market if they have to be strictly honest! Their tactics attract only a single target market, and result in discouraged and disillusioned customers over the long term. Avoid their “secret” marketing tactics, and learn the real stuff instead.

Things they recommend that do not work for startups:

1. **Traffic Exchanges.** You click on other people's ads and they click on yours, and everybody gets more traffic. Only the problem is, nobody is interested in purchasing (you certainly aren't, why would anyone else be?), they are only interested in inflating their traffic. This is a waste of time, because it does not increase income.

2. **List building.** They present it as the instant answer. It takes time to build, and only happens if you promote your LIST instead of promoting your SITE. Every business does NOT need an email list, it is an optional thing, and a list is ONLY good if it helps you to develop good relationships with your customers.
3. **Freebies.** Freebies usually attract freebie seekers – these people are cheap, and do not make good customers. Further, if you want a freebie to work, you have to advertise IT instead of advertising your SITE. Samples and promos do work well for some businesses, but only if it is a carefully chosen item, and ONLY if it helps to increase your sales, not just your traffic.
4. **Safelists, Announcement Lists, Ad Lists.** Everybody is there to SELL, not to buy. Nobody is reading your ad, and you are wasting your time.
5. **List Builder Programs.** Again, everyone is there to sell, not to buy. These programs waste your time.
6. **Free Classified or Free for All Link sites.** These are bad news. Your ad does not stay there long enough to be read before it scrolls off, and these sites are banned from search engines. Also, people visit these sites to SELL, not to buy, so nobody is interested in your ad.
7. **Automated Search Engine Submissions.** You do NOT need to submit your site more than once (unless you have neglected it for a LONG time and just did major changes, or unless you rebuilt it with new page names). Automated submissions do not even submit to the best search engines (which require manual submissions). Try www.selfpromotion.com if you want to know how to do it right, this site helps you through the submit process in an effective way (and you can use it free).
8. **Autosubmits to blogs, forums, etc.** This is a spam tactic, and will get you in big trouble, besides being TOTALLY ineffective.
9. **Overuse of Autoresponders.** This will kill your business, because it is impersonal and people know it. Use autoresponders only as an enhancement to personal contact, or to deliver repetitive information, with a clear invitation for personal contact if needed.
10. **Advertising on forums.** If you use a forum, you need to be a real person, and participate. Do not just send ads, it is ineffective.
11. **Joint Ventures.** This is an “internet marketing” recommendation that you see in most IM books. These do NOT work for startups, or for any business that does not have a substantial customer base. They do not want your great idea, they want your customer list. See Collaborations below for more on using cooperation in a good way.

Now, a quick listing of stuff that DOES work, and how to find more info on it:

1. **Directory Listings** – Find good quality directories to list for free. Directory listings are reviewed by a person, which makes them different than Free Classifieds.
2. **Search Engines** – Submit your home page, ONCE, to the top search engines (MSN, Yahoo, and Google).
3. **Article Marketing** – Write good quality information, and submit it to article directories. Do NOT write ads! Put a signature line at the bottom, with a link to your site. More on online article marketing can be found here: <http://www.articlemarketingmagic.com/> . You can also try traditional print article publications. Harder to GET published, but big kudos if you do!
4. **Signature Lines** – Use signature lines in emails, forum posts, and other communications.
5. **Paid Ads** – Do the math before you commit, and choose paid ads that increase your site revenue.
6. **Link Exchanges** – Do NOT use Link Exchange programs. Just participate in forums and when you see someone with a site that has relevant content that you feel you can respect, politely suggest a link trade – your link on their site, for their link on your site. Not worth spending a lot of time on, but worth getting when you can get a good one. You can swap links, or full ads.
7. **Viral Marketing** – Viral marketing works best when you can gather a group of people to create a viral product – a freely distributable item that has genuine value, which has your business info in it. Not a magic bullet, and not very helpful for startups, but useful sometimes.
8. **Forum Participation** – That means PARTICIPATION, not ADVERTISING. Post a comment, encourage someone, ask a question, be a real person. Participate in Industry forums for information about your business, participate in other forums to find large numbers of your target market. Drop a signature line with each post. If you are friendly and helpful, people will click the link and you'll get business from it. This is slow, but POWERFUL.

9. **Blogging** – Only works if you can keep up a steady flow of information or comment that people WANT. You must post at least once a week, and you need to figure out how to use it to gently market without being pushy.
10. **Events** – Online and offline events can really help you get your face and business out there. Prepare well, and consider carefully what you want to offer then and there. A great place to distribute promos, viral marketing products, brochures and business cards, or to offer a freebie that leads to further customer contact (the only kind of freebie worth offering). The rule is, make sure you have something with your contact info on it to send home with everyone you contact, or who visits your display.
11. **Business Cards** – Use business cards to keep people reminded of who you are and what you do. Create a good one, then hand them out to anyone who might be interested.
12. **Networking** – Get to know people, and get your name out there. Build relationships. Business comes as a natural result of familiarity and friendliness.
13. **Trade Associations** – Good networking, but some also offer good marketing benefits. Make sure the marketing benefits actually reach your market – if you sell soap, and promote in a magazine for soap makers, it is not going to help you since all the readers are ALSO selling soap. Make sure marketing benefits reach your CUSTOMERS, not your competitors.
14. **Press Releases** – Only useful if you have genuine NEWS. If you do, and if you write it well, these can be powerful.
15. **Guest Appearances** – When you get the chance to present a seminar, radio show, teleconference, etc, go for it. These get your name out there, and most are recorded, so even if no one hears them at the time, they can benefit you long term.
16. **Collaborations (JV)** – Cooperate with other business owners for mutual benefit. Organize an event together, produce a viral book together, swap services or goods, etc.
17. **Volunteering** – Give something first. Volunteering, sponsoring, and making your presence known can help establish a reputation for professionalism, and it can get you seen.
18. **Market to Customers** – Don't be pushy about this! Just let them know when you are having a sale (tactfully), send them a planner with discount coupons in it, put a flyer or catalog in the box with their order, send them a greeting card, etc. Make sure you only send them something they will appreciate.
19. **Local Media** – Choose wisely, because different media works for different businesses, but often local newspaper ads or radio ads are not extremely costly.

Don't let marketing overwhelm you. Pick two things you can do, and do them consistently. Once you get a routine for those, then add in another, perhaps two or three months down the road. Choose the things you can do most easily, and choose the things that will be most effective for YOUR business.

Marketing is a necessary facet of a successful business. Choose the right stuff, and it gets a whole lot easier, and a whole lot more rewarding.

Regular Updates

A site should have regular updates in order to do well. Some businesses put up a site, and never update it. Prices will be out of date, information will be stale and obsolete, and the site will gradually decline.

The web is a dynamic place. If your site gets outdated, you can bet someone else is now providing better and more current information. Keeping your information fresh is a vital part of keeping it alive.

Now, some people will tell you that in order to do well you have to update the site on a weekly or monthly basis with new information. While this strategy can help a site develop different kinds of traffic, it is not the only way to do things.

We have found that if you make updates to your site – and these can be ANY kind of updates – about once every three months, your site will continue to grow. **There are many ways to do this, and what works for your business depends on what you do.**

- A local tourist attraction posts photos of guests (with their permission) in a gallery. Regular updates occur from this, plus it generates powerful marketing.
- An information portal posts monthly article additions. This provides more content, and keeps things fresh.
- A web store holds regular sales, and posts their monthly newsletter to their website.
- A technology site makes regular changes to reflect changes in the market and available technologies.

Look for what applies to your business situation – what changes regularly with your business? Find that, and keep that current in your site, and it will do fine.

You'll also want to change your site appearance, to freshen it, once every two or three years. Site styles are like clothing styles, they become dated periodically.

What hurts a site is when it is obviously outdated, with old information, and a stale design. Keeping the information and design up to date can help to keep old customers coming back, and to bring new ones in with a sense of confidence.

Long Term Maintenance

I mentioned in the previous chapter that site design tends to get outdated in the same way clothing does. What is less obvious, but just as important for site function, is that CODING gets outdated, much the same way computer hardware or electronics do.

Web pages are written in code – it is a language that tells the browser how to show the page. Roughly translated, it is like a list of instructions: show this image here, put this text here (in this size, with this font, in this color), put a box here and put this text inside it... etc.

When a visitor asks for a page, the server sends the page to the browser. The browser “reads” the page, and follows the instructions.

The problem comes in because each year, new kinds of code instructions are written, and browsers are updated to be able to read the new code. Sometimes when the new ones are written, it means that old ones have to be eliminated, or the newer browsers interpret the older instructions differently. **So a page that looked fine one day may suddenly look weird when the site visitor updates their browser (or when they get a new computer).**

Computers are changing too. Monitors are getting bigger. **Design for large monitors is distinctly different than design for smaller ones – more complex, richer in content per page.** A site that was designed for a small monitor will look funky in a big one – a little bitty box sitting in the middle of a great big screen – or worse, a page that flexes, which gets stretched way out of shape on a large monitor!

Those changes are not ones that can be anticipated, so even good design requires maintaining and updating. You can expect to have to have your site overhauled (with significant code changes), about once every 2-3 years. You can expect to have to rebuild from the ground, up, about once every 4-5 years. This is just part of maintaining a site.

Other maintenance issues exist also, because sometimes files get corrupted, sometimes download problems occur, sometimes a shopping cart will develop a problem. Programming code is not 100% stable, and never will be. Even with simple sites, sometimes things go weird, and someone has to go in and troubleshoot.

When you have dynamic features on your site (shopping carts, forums, Content Management Systems, etc), then there are also security issues. Some of them are annoyances, or things that will just make a customer a little leary of using your site. Some of them are major things that can get your site shut down if someone hacks into it and uses your site for illegal purposes.

Now, while there really is no need to stay up nights worrying about this, it IS something you need to take seriously. If you have that kind of site, it will need to have security updates run periodically, and it will need to have the server software (which provides the framework for the site) updated now and again. It is wise to check once a month for minor updates, and once every six months for major upgrades.

If you use a form on your site, you will also want to have the code for it reconstructed every six months or so. I highly recommend that you use a service to provide form processing for you, and that you NOT use form code that is hosted on your own server – this can be a huge security risk, and can get your site shut down if someone uses the form in an illegal manner (when you use a service, they keep the form more secure so this is not likely to happen). This is one way you can turn your security headaches over for someone else to have to worry about!

Regular maintenance of a site helps you to insure that what you think you are delivering to your customers, and what you actually ARE delivering, are one and the same. And it insures that your site will steadily grow, instead of sitting there without progress.

Common Website Mistakes to Avoid

Ok, here is the comprehensive listing of “Bad Website Ideas”, that will hopefully help you know what design and text issues to avoid. This is a listing of common mistakes made by first time website designers, and do it yourself web designers (and an appallingly large number of professed commercial web designers!). It is not meant to criticize, but to help you understand what the mistakes are, why they matter, and what to do instead. It can also help you insure that your designer is doing a quality job if you have hired someone on a strict budget.

Some of these issues are covered in context in other sections, this listing is just a quick reference so you can assess a site quickly.

1. **Bad Backgrounds** – Background patterns that have high contrast will conflict with text. You can put the image into a graphics program, and turn the contrast down, and the brightness up. You may need to adjust the color some. Wash it out so it is very pale. If you still want it strong, then put your text into a box with a plain colored background, and just keep the pattern around the outside of the box.
2. **Huge Images** – Compress large images, and crop and scale them so that they are faster to download.
3. **Sound Loops** – These are annoying! Set the sound to loop just two or three times, or give your visitors the option of turning it off.
4. **Unnecessary Flash** – Make it optional, or make sure that Flash design really is an asset to 95% or more of your site visitors. Otherwise, use a simpler development method.
5. **Useless Pages** – Each page should be there for a reason that benefits the customer. If it is not, then take it out.
6. **Wasting Time** – Awkward functions, cumbersome shopping carts, slow pages, features that do not work, confusing instructions, etc. Have several people review your site, and take their comments seriously.
7. **Bad Doorways** – Home pages that say nothing but “click to enter”, or that have obscure graphics for entering the site. Get to the point, provide options and good info on your home page!
8. **Bad Text Size** – Keep text sizes compact, but not too small – size 2 or 3 is right for most info, 1 or 2 for less important, 4 or 5 for emphasis.
9. **Low Contrast** – Make sure your text and background color contrast well. Avoid “vibrating colors” (colors of the same intensity which compete for attention). Avoid pale pink on white, or yellow on white, unless you choose very intense colors. Remember, always choose a stronger contrast with text than you think you need to, as it tends to wash out due to its small size.
10. **Bad Frames** – Do not use frames unless you have a strong reason for doing so. They are bad for search engine indexing, and they are of no use to the visitor.
11. **Overlapping Items** – Check your site in several browsers. Some HTML editing programs produce items that do not stay in the same place all the time, and this can cause embarrassing problems.
12. **Horizontal Scroll** – Avoid making a site so big that most of your visitors have to scroll sideways to see it all. 1000 pixels wide is the largest you want to make a site currently.
13. **No Scroll** – NEVER set a page to No Scroll. All it does is permanently remove the scroll bars – maybe you think that looks nice, but it means that your visitors cannot even SEE the parts that are hidden, because they cannot scroll to get at them. It is rude.
14. **MS Word Pages** – PLEASE, PLEASE do not create pages in MS Word, Open Office, Publisher, Excel, or other programs that were not designed to create web pages as their primary function! They do it badly! Try out NVU (a free HTML editor) – it is not perfect but at least it does better than secondary programs. MS Office programs are the worst, they produce bloated code, and pages that do not function predictably. NO professional designer worth paying will use that kind of program!
15. **Form Problems** – Make sure your forms function, or put an email address on the page. Remember, when a form does not function, the visitor has no way of telling you that it did not function!
16. **No Contact** – No contact means “possible scam”. Make sure you have clear contact information posted – on every page, or on a Contact page that is accessible from every page.
17. **Popups** – Don’t use popups. They annoy people. Do not use dhtml “windows” either – they STILL annoy people! Annoying your site visitors is not good. Half of all visitors have them turned off anyway, so they won’t even see it long enough to BE annoyed.
18. **Typos** – Clean up your text. A typo or two is not going to be a big deal. A page riddled with them is unprofessional, and deadly to a business.

19. **Purely Ugly** – Lack of aesthetic balance, bad graphics, ugly color combinations, etc. Ask your neighbor – the one with the nicely decorated house, for a site review. Then listen.
20. **Bad Animations** – Too fast, too many, or unmeaningful animations need to be corrected. Slower frame rates are more effective, and no more than ONE animation per screen view.
21. **Bad Navigation** – Confusing, illogical, or tangled navigation needs to be corrected. Logical link names, logical categories and organization of pages, and no more than three clicks to get to what you want (in general – there are a few exceptions to this).
22. **Flashing or Scrolling Text** – Avoid it except for a single word or two at most – attention getters only, NEVER use it for key content or important titles. Keep it slow enough to actually READ, or it is useless.
23. **Poor Information** – Talking about it but never getting to the point, lack of unique content, inaccurate information, badly written information, etc. Clean it up and give it genuine value.
24. **No Consistency** – Message, design, navigation, and function should coordinate throughout the entire site. If it doesn't, it confuses your visitor and makes them think your business is unreliable.
25. **No Marketing** – You have to register your site with the search engines, but you also have to market it in effective ways. If you don't, it won't grow.
26. **Overcomplexity** – Keep It Simple Silly! Simple sites that work well are the goal. Do not make anything more complex than it needs to be to perform essential functions.
27. **No Differentiation** – Your site needs something valuable and unique about it.
28. **All Links, No Info** – A page of links is not information. If you provide a directory, give commentary on the links.
29. **Browser Specific** – It is rude to tell your visitors that they have to use a certain browser to visit your site. This is a sure way to lose customers.
30. **Requires Plugins** – Don't require plug-ins unless you have a compelling reason (which benefits the customer).
31. **Under Construction** – Avoid “under construction” signs. They stop search engine indexing, and they make people think you are unprepared. Use a more helpful notice, such as, “We are not completely finished adding information or products to this site, if you need something that is not available yet, please email us and we'll be happy to help you personally.” This provides something of value.
32. **5 Pages or Less** – You cannot showcase a business well enough to compete when using only a 5 page website. You need certain standard pages (About, Contact, Policies, etc), to maintain credibility, and you need well thought out information pages which answer the questions that the visitor is most likely to have. A “one page website” REALLY hurts your credibility! The dirty secret of web design is that it takes very little more effort to create a 10 page website (which will be sufficient to either showcase a simple business well, or to provide a solid foundation for a larger site) for very little more than a 5 page one. The design and structure process is the most complicated aspect of a simple site, and adding pages is easy after that. If they can provide a 5 page website for \$400 or \$500, they can give you a 10 page one for \$500 or \$700, because all they have to do is use the same template, and put in additional content (if they tell you it will cost you \$100 a page to add pages, RUN, don't walk, and find a more reasonable designer!).

That was a long list, but it includes the most common issues. Notice, they are not things like “failure to comply with W3C coding standards” or anything else that is technical. They are identifiable, and correctable things.

This list doesn't cover every reason why a business site does not make money, but it does cover the most common reasons why people leave a site instantly.



About the Author

This book was entirely written by Laura Wheeler, owner of Firelight Web Studio. She is a busy Mom of Eight children, five of whom are still at home. She homeschools, and works her business in around the needs of her family. She puts in long hours, and manages to complete the equivalent of full time work most days. She subcontracts some services to trusted sources, and works personally with her clients.

Way back in 1982, she took a two week course in computer usage. She failed it utterly, and could not understand the command line interface used at the time. About 14 years later, the family was gifted a Mac Classic. After a little tentative exploration of the use of it, she found that she could actually understand how to use it quite well. She bought a copy of Macs for Dummies, and within 6 months had reformatted the hard drive just to see if she could.

Within two years they upgraded their computer to a new model, and Laura was hired in a small school as a computer instructional aide. Her business was started a few months later. At first it was just printing, word processing, and data entry. Not many people had home computers in the small town they lived in, so she got a bit of work doing that. She kept learning more about computers, and built her first computer system shortly after. She learned graphics processing, page layout, and copy writing in this time period also.

She saw her first website in 1999. Five months later she was awarded a contract with the Town of Medicine Bow to redesign and maintain the town website. She began building websites for herself and others, picking up contracts with the Wyoming Dental Association, and the Historic Virginian Hotel, and several others. She built many websites for a variety of purposes, including craft sales, electronic specialty services, non-profit organizations, and many more.

When Laura began business, she had no money to spare. Her business was build around the ownership of a computer, printer, scanner, and later an internet connection. She bought software when she could afford it, and learned to use free software when she could not afford it. She knew that if she did things the "recommended way", she'd be heavily in debt, and might never crawl out from under it. There had to be a way to start with nothing but work and determination, and that is what she did. Since she was in a small town, her business evolved into several lines of work in order to fill local need. Her website services encompassed everything a client needed, because her clients could not afford to hire a team. This need gave her a broad base of skills in all areas of website design, layout, and administration.

In 2003, her youngest son was diagnosed with cancer. She resigned as web administrator for the Town and for several other contracts. Her business was streamlined so that it could be flexible enough to accommodate sometimes unpredictable medical needs. Her websites were closed down, and new ones were established which would adapt themselves to a more flexible work schedule. Basically, she took her experience and equipment, and started over. Most of her business lines involving house calls, building or troubleshooting equipment, and anything else that was not portable, was shut down. She began putting more effort into her own website work and instructional writing. She began building shopping carts, exploring more web marketing strategies, and developed more expertise in the home business market. During this time she did not make a lot from her work, but spent a lot of time laying a good foundation. When the work began to pay, it did so whether her schedule was predictable or not.

Life interfered again with a difficult pregnancy. Near the end she was put on bedrest and bought a laptop. Her baby died a few minutes after birth, and after a month of heavy grief during which she could not bring herself to face the task of writing down the story, she began hard work on her websites again. She feels that work saved her sanity during this time. The worst part about losing a child is the emptiness and the purposelessness. Work kept her occupied and she made rapid progress with her sites. Within five months she build and established over a dozen sites. Her client base began to grow again, and her ability to offer more extensive services grew also. Her business is now fully portable, and she has gained the ability to work in spite of family crises (which have occurred with regular frequency), and in almost any location.

One reason Laura is good at working with shoestring startups, is because she has done it. Not once, but twice, and with multiple business lines. She knows how long it takes to get orders or traffic. She knows the inexpensive

ways to get that traffic, and she understands what makes a customer or visitor feel comfortable on a site so that they will purchase or come back. She is also skilled at teaching other people what she has learned, and knows how to explain it in terms that they can understand if they have no experience with it.

The Town of Medicine Bow has reissued the web contract to Laura. They contracted with her to redesign their site, and to write an extensive website administrative manual for the Town. After the completion of this special contract, they will resume a standard maintenance and improvement contract with her. They feel she is simply the best person to do the job for them, in producing a quality site for them, marketing it effectively without unnecessary or ineffective expenditure, and in making good design decisions that suit the resources and specific needs of their small businesses. The Town Council also trusts her to give them accurate information about what is genuinely needed, and to honorably fulfill the terms of the contract.

Her experience and expertise are unique. She knows the backroads that nobody else travels, which can save time and money. She understands which of the "experts" are telling the truth, and which ones are just trying to get you to buy their product. She knows that there is one truth for large corporations with healthy advertising budgets, and another nearly hidden truth for small startups that don't have money to waste. She understands how hard it is in these times for the little guy to get a foot in the door and make a place for himself in a world that is dominated by the mega-corporations. And she understands which back doors will actually get you inside, and which ones will get you mugged. And she is good at assessing individual needs so she can give good advice on what is a useful feature and what is a waste of time or money.

Her niche is one that almost nobody else wants to occupy. The expertise required in this area is difficult to acquire, and it shuts the door on many of the perceived "cash cows" in the web business world - but for Laura, it opens up possibilities for herself and her clients that provide very real opportunities. Not only is it a tough niche to occupy, but many pros do not want it because there is no profit in telling people that they DON'T need the nifty gadget you just learned how to install! Laura makes her profit from building cost efficient sites for shoestring startups (her overhead is low so she can offer quality at affordable rates), and from producing information on various home business topics.

Life has taken her in an unexpected direction. Some of that direction has hurt, and then benefited her in unlooked for ways. All of the happenstance, strategy, and research that she has done to learn and develop a high level of expertise in helping startup website and business owners in all aspects of developing a successful web presence, combine together to give her a combination of skills which sets her apart from virtually every other web designer in the nation.