



Developing a Website that Works for Your Business

by Glenn and Peg Reyer

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This publication explains the process for developing a website to improve your company's outreach and productivity. While most examples given here apply to promoting the sale of products and/or services, the process would be the same whether you were developing a site to be used by your suppliers, partners, or employees.

First, we discuss the role and objectives of a website and the need to register a domain name. We then explain the process of working with a website developer to build and deploy a quality site. Finally, we address the costs associated with development and maintenance and give criteria to consider when selecting a developer.

Our goal is to have you enjoy the many benefits of a well designed and constructed website that works for your business.

WEBSITE FUNDAMENTALS

The Role of Your Website

Properly designed, your website can help you to reach global markets, interact with customers, leverage suppliers, strengthen partnerships, and secure investors.

Your website is an “always open” communications channel between your business and the online world. Properly designed, it can help you to reach global markets, interact with customers, leverage suppliers, strengthen partnerships, and secure investors. However, a good website will not make up for a bad business plan, defective products, or poor service. Like a devoted employee, your website aims to move your company toward achieving your business goals. Nevertheless, your long-term success depends on being able to live up to the expectations that you set for your customers, vendors, partners, and investors.

If you understand that your website is first and foremost a communications vehicle, then you will have a much better chance of creating a site that will live up to *your* expectations. Furthermore, because your website is only one of many media that you can use to exchange information with your target audiences, it is best to consider your website as only one component of a successful communications strategy.

Your Website as a Living Library

A major advantage of a well designed website is that it can be easily updated and expanded as your products and services change and your business grows. If you make your site a repository for all information about your products, services, and company, it can serve as a library from which you can extract material when developing your other communication vehicles, such as corporate brochures and product literature. This practice will ensure that you deliver consistent messages, even if you choose to customize the presentations for specific audiences. As an additional benefit, using your website as a living library will reduce the effort, time, and cost of developing your other media.

Objectives of a Commercial Site

The primary objectives of a commercial website are to inform online visitors and stimulate them to take action.

Generally speaking, the primary objectives of a commercial website are to inform online visitors and stimulate them to take action. These actions can include calling you for more information, placing an order, subscribing to a newsletter, and responding to a survey. Assuming that your business has something of value to offer, the extent to which your website will perform up to your expectations will depend on the clarity of your messages and how easily your visitors can find what they are looking for.

Registering Your Domain Name

One of the first things you need to do is to establish a domain name for your website and register it with one of several companies that maintain the list of domain names for every website connected to the Internet

worldwide. This registration process ensures that each domain name is unique. Be sure to choose a name that relates to your business or product brand – ideally, the name you use for marketing purposes.

If you are not familiar with the registration process, your developer can secure your domain name on your behalf. The registration fee typically ranges from \$45.00 for three years (the minimum recommended) to \$150.00 for ten years. If your developer registers your domain name, be sure to obtain all the information about the registration. Should you decide to change developers at some point, the domain registration information will be required for anyone else to maintain your site or to develop a new site with the same domain name. Also, be sure to keep your registration active for the time you want to operate your site. The registration company will send an email notice (preferably to you and not to your developer) when your registration is about to expire.

THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Developing the Content

Website content comprises text (known as copy) and visual elements such as photographs and illustrations, all of which should serve to communicate your messages. A few well-chosen words (known as keywords) embedded in the copy will capture the attention of your audience and will cause search engines to direct Internet surfers to your site when appropriate.

Given that the primary objectives of a commercial website are to inform online visitors and stimulate them to take action, the first questions to ask yourself when you start to develop your content are:

- What action do I want visitors to take?
- What information do they need to have in order to be motivated and able to take that action?

It is good to begin by identifying the “keywords” that Internet surfers will likely use when doing a search for the products and services you offer. Then use these words somewhere in the sentences or lists that appear on the appropriate pages of your site. Note that search engines are unable to read keywords that are embedded in graphic elements.

Having a professional writer develop your copy is usually a good investment if you want to be sure your messages are clear and polished. If you draft your own copy, it is a good practice to have it edited by a professional. Be sure the tone is appropriate for your audience; it can range from formal, to conversational, to whimsical. Your developer may include professional writing as part of the development service.

Visuals are very important to telling your story, especially if your message is that you have quality goods for sale. Photographs and illustrations need to have good composition, color, and clarity. Hiring a professional photographer or illustrator is usually a worthwhile investment if your products are tangible. If you sell services, you can

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use photographs of your facility and/or personnel, or you can buy stock photographs of representative images from online vendors. Either you or your developer can search the libraries and make the purchases. Your developer may also include professional photography and illustration in the development service.

Depending on the nature of your business, it may be worth the investment to include animation, video clips, and/or sound to better get your messages across to your audience. For example, if you are a tool manufacturer, you may want to include videos on how to use and maintain your tools. Or, if you are a fabric cleaner, you may want to include animations of material changing from soiled to clean. Content elements like these can be added incrementally.

As you develop your content, remember that your site will be accessible worldwide. If your intent is to sell globally – or to specific countries where English is not the preferred language – then you may want to offer online visitors the option of viewing your site’s copy in another language. Translation services are readily available, but you should discuss the process for including language options with your website developer before making the investment.

Creating the Presentation

Printed materials can range from simple postcards or letters to elaborate brochures or catalogs. The presentation range for websites is even broader. Beginning with unformatted copy on a plain background, you can add a variety of fonts, multiple colors, photographs and illustrations, decorative graphics, animation, video clips, and sound.

The presentation should be in keeping with the image that you want your company to have in the marketplace.

The presentation should be in keeping with the image that you want your company to have in the marketplace. Like the copy, the presentation can be formal, casual, or whimsical. Colors can be subdued or vibrant. Photographs can be actual or representative. If used at all, animation should be limited to simple motions that enhance rather than detract from your messages. Video and sound can be helpful when offering online tours or tutorials, but in most cases they are unnecessary.

If you choose to use actual photographs of your facilities, personnel, or products, they must be digital and provided electronically as .jpg, .gif, or .tif files. Unlike printed media, websites need only low resolution. Some developers have the tools to “retouch” photographs. In addition to simple scaling and cropping, colors can be adjusted and objects within a photograph can be extracted from their surroundings, a process referred to as silhouetting.

Professional graphic designers are usually a good investment when creating the visual design for your site. Once again, your developer may include professional graphic design in the development service.

Designing the Navigation

Just as your website visitors have diverse needs and interests, they also have a wide range of computer skills, and they will quickly abandon a site that leaves them lost and confused. Every page needs to present its own information, as well as an easy way to move forward to more related information or back to a point where alternative paths of site exploration begin.

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Navigation is the arrangement of buttons, menu tabs, and links that enable visitors to move from page to page and from section to section within a long page. Links can also be used to carry visitors to an email template or to other websites. Offering the latter is not without risk of losing visitors to other sites, so it is a capability that should be used with forethought.

On small sites, every page should have the means of accessing every other page. That is, every page should contain *all* the navigational elements (buttons or tabs), and these elements should be in the same place on each page. One exception to this policy is having “subordinate” pages that present details about a particular product or service in your portfolio. These pages often take the form of “pop-up windows” that visitors close after viewing the expanded copy and/or enlarged photograph.

On large sites, every page should have the navigational elements for moving to the top-level pages in the architecture. For example, your **Products** page, accessed from your **Home** page, may present categories of products with navigational elements that lead to subordinate pages that then describe the products in that category. In this case, all the subordinate **Products** pages should have the means of returning to the top-level **Products** page, as well as to the **Home**, **About Us**, and **Contact Us** pages.

Determining the Behavior

As a visitor moves a mouse to navigate your site, it is possible to have changes occur on the pages. For example, when a mouse crosses over a link to another page, the copy associated with the link could change color. A “mouse-over” could also trigger the appearance of a menu that otherwise remains hidden.

Behavior should be included in your discussion about navigation. If you and your developer determine that, for example, menu tabs or hidden menus would be appropriate for accessing specific content, you should decide what mouse movements or commands should activate and de-activate the menus. Options include mouse-over, click and hold while dragging, mouse-up, click, and double-click.

The graphic design of the behavioral elements such as menus should be compatible with the other visuals on your site and consistent from page to page.

Adding Personalized Functionality and Content

Nearly all websites offer visitors an easy way to contact the site owners. In response to a click, an email template is presented on the screen; the visitor then creates and sends a message. Some websites also have form-generation capability, which is used to present a template with defined fields – such as “Name” and “Address” – for visitors to fill in. This functionality is useful for applications such as requesting price estimates for custom-made goods, like window treatments, for example. As with the email above, the form contains visitor-supplied information and is submitted with a simple click.

e-Commerce sites enable visitors to make purchases using established accounts or credit cards. Each visitor can create an order, usually by selecting an item for sale and then clicking an “add to cart” button. Once shopping is complete, the visitor “checks out” by entering account or credit card data and shipping instructions. An online form, as discussed above, is used to capture the visitor’s personal information.

Some businesses, such as online training companies and stock brokerages, deliver services via their websites. In these cases, clients log on to personalized pages by entering user names and passwords. The information given to each client is limited by terms and conditions previously agreed upon. Password-protected functionality such as this involves highly sophisticated programming and therefore represents a significant investment.

Not all websites serve customers; some are designed for vendors, partners, or employees. These sites also use password protection to ensure control and confidentiality. The content presented to each person who logs on can be personalized. For example, vendors can monitor inventory levels of their products at the website owner’s factory, sending new shipments in accordance with supply contracts. Or, product distributors can access a manufacturer’s site to look up prices that are unique and confidential to each distributorship. Or, employees can log on to their company site to update their personal profiles.

If you decide to include personalized functionality or content on your site, it is especially important for you to be involved in defining the objectives and requirements. Be sure that you have the resources to fulfill the expectations that your site will set for online visitors.

Establishing the Architecture

The website architecture, sometimes depicted as a site map, organizes the content and defines the navigational scheme for moving from page to page and within pages. The presentation (visual design) for individual pages and the architecture for the entire site are interdependent, because the navigational elements must be designed into the “look” of each page. Hence, the architecture, presentation, and navigation usually mature together as various options are explored and refined.

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Your website should be designed to accommodate changes in your business. The initial release can be limited in scope in order to meet your budget and schedule, but your website developer should build growth options into the original architecture. A site that is well designed and constructed should have a lifespan of years. Regular updates should be made, of course, to keep the content current and accurate. Unlike print media, websites easily accommodate frequent changes, and these can usually be made at relatively little cost.

Once you have established objectives for your website, you and your developer should agree on a preliminary architecture and a release strategy, in accordance with your budget. Begin the architecture discussion by making a list of all the information that you want your site to convey. Your developer will then propose ways to organize that information into web pages.

Following some universal conventions for organizing your information will help to make your online visitors feel at home on your site. Most commercial websites designed to sell products have at least four pages:

The **Home** page states what your business sells to whom, and it tells why and when visitors should do business with you. This page should make it easy to find out more about your company, products, and/or services by presenting the buttons, menu tabs, and links that will lead the visitor to other pages of your site. If you want to call attention to special offers, the page design should accommodate promotional messages.

The **Products** page describes what you sell (products and/or services) and the advantages they offer to your customers. This page should also contain the “Call to Action” – a statement of what you want your visitors to do. For example: contact you by email to obtain more information, call you to place an order, or place an online order using a credit card.

The **About Us** page contains information about your company. If service is a major component of your business, this page should also contain information about the people who deliver the service. The purpose of the **About Us** page is to make visitors feel confident that your company has the ability to serve them well. If your business is housed in a facility that projects a positive image for your company, then include its photograph on your **About Us** page.

The **Contact Us** page presents visitors with multiple options for contacting you. This page should have your telephone and fax numbers, your postal mailing address, your facility address (for receiving non-postal deliveries), and your email address. This page usually has a button that creates an email form, pre-addressed to someone at your company; the visitor just fills in the message as discussed earlier. Note that most web-hosting service providers include email service with their hosting service. It is good policy to use the email addresses they provide, because the address will include the domain name of your website. This lends more credibility to your business and offers another opportunity for promoting your site.

Depending on your business's size and your website development budget, you may want to have more pages. For example, you can have multiple **Products** pages that group your products logically. It may also make sense to separate your services from your products by adding a **Services** page. You can bolster visitor confidence in your company by adding a **Clients** or **Testimonials** page, and you can direct visitors to a **News** page that highlights your latest activities and offerings.

THE DEPLOYMENT PROCESS

Planning a Release Strategy

Once you have prioritized the information and functionality that you want included on your site, you and your developer can create a plan for initial and successive releases that gradually expand the site's scope and capabilities.

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The time it takes to prepare for the initial release can vary from several weeks for a simple site to many months for a complex one. Website development is an iterative process in which the components mature in parallel. While the release plan can cover a year or more, the architecture should be planned from the start to accommodate future needs.

If you have a site that is already in operation and you are embarking on the creation of a new site to replace it, you may want to limit the initial release of your new site to the scope and functionality of your present site. This way, you can "go live" sooner with updated content, a fresh presentation, and enhanced navigation.

Successive releases of your website can include more content as well as new or enhanced functionality, such as an e-commerce capability. Pre-planned incremental releases give you an earlier return on your investment than does one major release of a "completed" site. Besides, it is likely that you will continue to have new ideas for putting your website to work and incremental development will be ongoing!

Creating a Test Site

Once you have reviewed the preliminary presentation concepts and chosen a "look" for your site, your developer will program your content and the graphic elements into each page defined by the architecture. Every page in your site consists of one or more files that contain the content, graphic design elements, code for personalized functionality, etc. Thus, even the simplest site comprises several files.

In order for you to view and navigate through an unreleased version of your site, your developer will probably upload each page to a computer that is connected to the Internet. Although your unreleased site is accessible from the Internet, the developer can make it invisible to the general public, as described below.

Some developers put an unreleased site up as “hidden” pages of their own sites. They give the address of the unreleased site’s **Home** page – known as the URL address – to the client, who then uses that address to view that **Home** page. From there, the other pages of the unreleased site can be accessed through the navigational elements.

Once you have your domain name registered, it usually makes sense for you to contract with a vendor that offers a website hosting service. Again, your developer can do this on your behalf. The fees for hosting vary significantly, depending on the needs of your site and the hosting service you choose. As with your domain name registration, be sure to keep your hosting contract information and remember to renew the contract to keep it active for the time you plan to operate your site.

Once your website hosting contract is in place, your developer can upload your unreleased site to the host as a test site. Then you can operate your site as though it were “live.” At this point, it is important for you to test all the navigation, read all the copy, ensure that the photographs and illustrations are in the right place, etc. When the test site is completed to your satisfaction, the developer will move the **Home** page to `www.yourdomainname.ext`, and you can then promote the availability of your new website!

COST OF WEBSITE OWNERSHIP

The cost of owning a website includes the domain name registration fee, the hosting fee, the developer fee, and any fees for additional services necessary to implement your personalized functionality and content. All these fees, with the exception of the developer fee, are ongoing via contract for the time you operate your site. Once you have completed all the versions of your site that you and your developer planned, there will be a maintenance fee for updates.

Development and maintenance fees depend on the fee structure of the developer. Not all developers are willing to maintain the sites they build, so you may have to find someone else to maintain your site once it is released. Maintenance usually involves changing the special promotion messages on your **Home** page, revising your **Products** and **Services** pages to reflect changes in your company’s offerings, updating your **Client** and **Testimonial** pages to call attention to your growth and successes, adding press releases to your **News** page, and so on. If your site was designed with growth in mind, these changes require little programming and, hence, minor fees.

Most developers charge by the hour, although some will quote on a project basis. The length of time it takes to develop the initial site usually depends as much on you as on the developer. If you are clear about the objectives for your site, provide good quality content, and respond quickly with feedback, then progress will be steady. If the developer has a lot of experience, good writing skills, graphic design capability, programming expertise, and project management skills, then you should be able to move smoothly through the process in

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accordance with a pre-defined schedule. Be sure to review this schedule periodically. Once you and your developer have experience working together, it may be necessary to make schedule adjustments to keep expectations realistic. When your site is completed, you and your developer should agree upon a schedule and fee for maintenance.

CHOOSING A DEVELOPER

It is likely that, unless you need a very basic site, your developer will be a team of people with all the skills needed to meet your initial and long-term requirements:

- ✓ *writing*
- ✓ *photography*
- ✓ *illustrating*
- ✓ *audio/video production*
- ✓ *graphic design*
- ✓ *programming*
- ✓ *project management*

Although the earlier sections of this paper refer to the developer as an individual, it is likely that, unless you need a very basic site, your developer will be a team of people with all the skills needed to meet your initial and long-term requirements: writing, photography, illustrating, audio/video production, graphic design, programming, and project management.

The degree to which your developer has these skills without outsourcing to a third party will be a key factor in the final cost and schedule for development. The more handoffs from resource to resource, the longer the project will take, the more it will cost, and the greater will be the chance that something will go wrong.

The need for the developer to outsource some of the work – especially if your site needs custom photography or complex functionality – should not be a problem, as long as the person with the primary responsibility for your site is a good communicator and project manager. That person should also have responsibility for your site for the duration of the development process.

The following is a list of things to consider when selecting a developer for your website. The qualifications align well with the major components of a website, so we will discuss them in that context. Note that the word “developer” in the following section refers to the development firm, which may be more than one person.

Content

Remember that your website is first and foremost a communications vehicle. Selecting a developer who has a basic understanding of your business is fundamental to having a website that will meet the needs of your online visitors. Someone who does not understand your messages will not be able to communicate them well.

Some developers have professional writing experience, while others need to outsource the copywriting. Outsourcing in this case risks distorted or inconsistent messages, unless the writer is involved throughout the entire revision process. It is important to realize that changes to copy are common throughout the development process. Oftentimes, the presentation and navigation evolve in ways that make changing the copy unavoidable. When the writer is not available to rework the copy or to approve changes, the person doing the programming must either wait or upload a revision that may be incorrect.

Outsourcing photography and illustration is less risky, because you will probably work directly with the photographer and artist until you have what you need. Once the photographs and illustrations are suitable for use and in digital form, they are unlikely to be changed, and the person(s) designing the presentation and programming the pages can work with them without involving the photographer or illustrator.

Presentation

Many developers who are not professional graphic designers call upon associates to create the visual design for the site. This can work well if the developer is adept at communicating your likes and dislikes. Sometimes developers who outsource the graphic design will have you work directly with the designer, at least until the concepts have matured.

When a third-party designer is involved, the developer who has some graphic design capability can often respond quickly and skillfully to your requests for minor changes to the presentation without calling upon the designer. This means faster turnaround and lower fees.

Taking the content and visual design and translating them to an active website requires programming skills. Enumeration of the many programming languages and their uses is beyond the scope of this paper, but the point to be made here is that the more skills your developer has without outsourcing, the better the chance of the project coming in on time and within budget.

Like a blueprint for a highly complex building, your website architecture should anticipate the movement of your online visitors as they search for the information they need. Landing on a page should be as rewarding as entering a room that contains what they seek.

Navigation and Behavior

The ability to anticipate the thought process of your online visitors is key to establishing a navigational scheme that will make moving through your site an easy and pleasant experience. High quality content that no one can find is useless. Your developer needs to think logically and have the discipline to ensure that all navigational and behavioral elements are consistent, obvious, and functional.

Personalized Functionality and Content

If you want personalized functionality on your site, look for a developer with mastery of the computer languages needed to implement that functionality. As with graphic design, some developers outsource this work, resulting in higher fees and slower turnaround.

Architecture

The architecture is the construction blueprint for your site. Like a blueprint for a highly complex building, your website architecture should anticipate the movement of your online visitors as they search for the information they need. Landing on a page should be as rewarding as entering a room that contains what they seek.

CONCLUSION

By now you understand how content, presentation, navigation, behavior, and functionality work together to make your site useful and of value to your visitors. Having a developer who can understand the ramifications of the many choices you make throughout the development process is essential to having a website that achieves its purpose. If you are successful, you will have a site that informs your online visitors and stimulates them to take the action necessary for you to get a healthy return on your investment.

About the Authors

Glenn Reyer

Glenn Reyer has nearly 30 years of experience in high-technology marketing with companies that include Cheyenne Software, NETg, WOMEX Online, EC Cubed, eShare Technologies, and PrimeLearning. As Vice President of Marketing and President, Glenn has participated in start-ups, turn-arounds, and mergers and acquisitions for public and private companies. He has experience with venture-funded fledglings, mid-sized emerging companies, and multi-billion dollar multi-national enterprises. During his career, Glenn has launched new product lines, revamped company strategies, formulated marketing and sales plans, and led the implementation of a wide range of marketing programs. He has helped to raise venture capital funding, plan for IPOs, thwart a hostile takeover attempt, and manage merger transitions. Glenn holds a B.S. degree in electrical engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and attended the Columbia Graduate School of Business.

Peg Reyer

Peg Reyer applies her background as an executive in engineering, manufacturing, and marketing to developing effective communications for diverse audiences. After spending 25 years working in high technology at Bell Telephone Laboratories and Digital Equipment Corporation, she co-founded New England Business Communications in 1994 and The Chester Company in 2001. Her experience managing engineering projects, manufacturing operations, worldwide marketing, customer support, and Information Technology programs enables her to help clients articulate and deliver compelling messages. Peg also designs and conducts workshops aimed at improving the profitability of small businesses. She holds a B.S. in mathematics from the University of Massachusetts and an M.S. in engineering and computer science from Northeastern University.

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