

Anatomy of a website Part I of II

Introduction

A website development project has many component parts. Some are well understood, some are misunderstood and some come as a complete surprise. This document outlines the many aspects of a web development project and demystifies them. Using a plain English approach, a trade mark of Red Evolution, this document provides a simple road map for online success.

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We need a website...

Not surprisingly web development projects often start with this premise. A variation on this theme might be '*Our website is looking dated, we need a new one...*' To many, the first stage, having established the need is to embark on the design. This is wrong.

KEY POINT Starting a web project by looking at the design is wrong.

The first stage of a website development project is to establish the need. This however does not mean simply deciding you need a website. Establishing the *need* means understanding the needs of your business and the needs of your customers and how a website might address those needs. For example:

- Our clients need access to support documentation for our products 24/7
- Our clients need to be able to view our available rental equipment in real time
- We need to showcase our products and services
- We need to sell our products globally, 24/7
- We need to provide new communication channels for our clients

Not surprisingly this phase of the project is often referred to as needs analysis. This work is key to the success of a web development project but is often poorly executed or even ignored in favour of getting on with the sexy stuff such as design and photography.

Someone a lot smarter than me summarised the result of ignoring *needs analysis* thus.

"The customer doesn't know what he wants until he sees what he gets, realises it's not what he needs even though it's exactly what he asked for."

This is perhaps the most testing aspect of a web development project and if it doesn't hurt the chances are you are not doing it properly. A detailed common understanding of what success looks like will prove invaluable as the project progresses and will give the whole project team clear terms of reference.

KEY POINT Establish the needs of the business. Understand the needs of the different stakeholder groups (company, staff, clients etc.)

Build it without any glitz

This approach assumes you are adopting the web development practice of separating content from presentation. In simple terms this means the content of your site, the words, pictures etc., are separated from the look and feel or design elements.

This can be achieved through the use of a Content Management System (CMS) and technologies such as Cascading Style Sheets (CSS). A CMS will also ensure your site can be maintained by non-techies as it hides all the code and script that makes your website work behind simple tools similar in functionality to a modern word processor.

KEY POINT Use a system that provides separation between content and presentation.

By using this method you can develop your website with a plain design and once you have your content, navigation and functionality sorted you can simply overlay the final design. Think of it as a rehearsal for a play wearing jeans and a tee shirt, everything is in place and all that's missing are the costumes and lighting.

At this stage you don't need to worry about the real copy, you can use a *lorum ipsum* generator (Google it) to create dummy content as a space filler. This approach allows the content and functionality of the site to drive the project instead of the design. Sound strange? Let me explain.

It's very unlikely you are building a website in the hope that nobody will visit it. In fact it's very likely that once your site is finished you will want lots of people to visit it. One of the ways to generate visitors to your website is by establishing it on the major search engines, such as Google. Can you ever remember a Google search that listed sites by how good they look? No; Google indexes your site by reading its content, it doesn't care a jot what the site looks like.

KEY POINT Your content plays a significant part in how Google will rank your site, the visual design plays virtually none.

I'm not suggesting the design isn't important I am however saying if the design compromises the site's content you may pay the price with a poor search engine ranking, and if the design compromises functionality you will alienate your users.

Website design

I'm not a designer but like most people I have an opinion on design. We have a design team and we rely on their skills to make a website work. Unfortunately when it comes to web design everybody is an expert. However, when you trawl through the web it's clear that *everybody* is not an expert.

KEY POINT Do not make the mistake of assuming because you can use Photoshop you can design a website.

Here are some design tips:

- Use a web designer
- Don't create your entire site with Flash
- Make sure the final design complies with web standards
- Don't use tables for design layout
- Don't use any in-line styles, use CSS
- Use somebody who understands all of the above!

Website content

Up to this point you have been using dummy content to help your designer, but you now need to develop the real content.

The content of your website is what Google reads when it indexes it. Although your web pages may use META tags - a short hidden description of the page - it's claimed Google prefers to read the same content people read. However Google doesn't use people to index your site, it uses software, sometimes called a *spider*. The content of your site has to be tagged to allow these spiders to figure out what it's about. Effective tagging is covered in Part II of this document.

Conclusion

This concludes Part I. We have looked at the importance of needs analysis, the importance of ensuring your content drives the design and the importance of making sure your content can be read by Google's software spiders.

In Part II we will:

- Expand on creating effective content and optimise it by finding valuable key words
- Take a general look at Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)
- Look at online marketing including Pay Per Click (PPC) and Google AdWords

If you would like an early bird copy of Part II please email david@redevolution.com