Notes for Starting a Web Site Project

One of the daunting things about getting your company or organization, or even just your own web site online is just the sheer size of the task. Gathering content. What will the site look like? How is the site organized? What about Responsive Design? Search Engine Optimization? E-Commerce? Unless you're doing this all the time professionally, it can all seem like a mountain to climb.

If you are working with a Designer or Developer, you can make your job a lot easier by understanding a basic outline of what the tasks are and who's responsible for what.

In general, for most web sites, the Design process involves three overlapping parallel tasks. *Visual Design, Information Design,* and *Content Development.* Ideally, different people are responsible for these different jobs. They entail different skill sets and appropriate knowledge. But the best processes are collaborative, with all involved in communication sharing information and ideas.

Content Development

Content is, in essence, what material is *actually on the web site.* This is ultimately the responsibility of the Site Owner, who has the clearest notion of what they want to say, who their audience is, and what purpose the web site is intended to accomplish. In business sites, the Site Owner will typically be a company, and would also have the clearest picture of their brand and messaging. If not, we need to have an *entirely different* conversation.

Visual Design

Visual design is the visual look and feel and overall functionality of a web site. In other words, what it looks like. This is the responsibility of the Web Designer, who applies graphic and Web Design expertise to interpreting the site's content and expressing it in an attractive and accessible way. They will incorporate the client's branding and message, visual identity materials, logos, etc., and the Site Owner's content into an attractive whole.

Furthermore, it's the Web Designer's job to make sure the site's visual look maintains and extends the client's branding and visual identity, or even refines it. When a visitor visits your web site, they may have a brochure, a presentation or a business card, and they should see the same branding. They should immediately think, "these are the same people, and they've got their s**t together."

It's *really* easy to get derailed by the "tech" of it all. Early in the web days, even the branding powerhouse Disney made a misstep with one of their early online offerings, *Disney Blast*. It was very "tech", kind of *Tron* and "cyber" styled – brushed metal and neon green, Mickey in a robot suit. Parents just plain HATED IT. They were looking for the familiar Disney Magic Kingdom look and feel to send their wee sprouts and little princesses to, especially for *paid content*. Disney swiftly revised their site to represent their familiar and reassuring branding.

This is where Site Owners often get *distracted*, since this is the "pretty" and "oooh ahhhh" part of the process. And I do have to admit that, "whoa, all the *colors*, man" can *totally* be pretty fun. People can get very caught up in how the package *looks*, and neglect that what's important is what's *inside* the box. A Coke bottle may be iconic, but it's pretty useless if there's nothing IN the bottle. Conversely, 12oz. of Coke in a plain glass tumbler *is still Coke.* The Visual Design is *informed by the content*, not the other way around. Content is the *steak*, think of the Web Site's look and feel as the "*sizzle*."

Information Design

In simple terms, **Information Design is how the web site's is organized around the site's content**, and how site visitors get to it. This is usually the purview of the Web Designer or Developer, but done in close consultation with the Site Owner.

This is the area that often gets neglected by both Site Owners and otherwise talented Designers and Developers. Part of the reason for this, is that if it is done well—it is *invisible.* A site with good information design is easy to navigate, has information where users can find it, and operates smoothly. It is also efficient to maintain and update. Information Design is a lot of the "under the hood" back-end stuff, how the site's Content is organized and how the site functions. And to be fair, there is a LOT of overlap with Content Development and Visual Design. Where I mentioned "steak" and "sizzle" earlier, consider Information Design the *bones*.

Typically an early stage of this is deciding on wether or not you want a *static* or *dynamic* site. A Static site, sometime called "brochure sites" are relatively simple sites where the content is not time-sensitive, is not particularly interactive, and will be updated infrequently. A Dynamic site is one that updates frequently, may have a fair amount, or a lot, of interactive features, include e-commerce, or a great deal of content. The other question informing this, is wether or not the Site Owner desires to be directly hands-on involved with adding content, editing, or managing the site, or do they plan to depend on their Web professionals to do it.

A quick yardstick on that particular questions can be looked at like this. Many Site Owners set up basic sites with simple Online Site Builders provided by Web hosting companies or Content

Management Systems such as *WordPress, Joomla or Drupal*, in the hope of saving money by doing most or all of it themselves, or at least the updates once the site is launched. The question to ask yourselves is, "will I actually *do* it?" If your work function keeps you busy, or your time is best spent on whatever it is your company actually *does*, it can be worth it to keep your Designers and/or Developers around.

Still, using a CMS system can still be a good choice, based on the type of site, and your usage model. Many site owners are happy to use WordPress or another system for the versatility, ease and speed of development and still have their Web Pros work for, or with them to maintain it. The key advantage of CMS systems is that the site's content is kept in a database, and the site's design dictated by separate HTML, CSS, JavaScript, and PHP code. This allows swift modifications to the design and organization of sites without the necessity of massive recoding, a huge, huge time and money saver, particularly with larger or more complex sites.

For Site Owners who desire to be involved with the updating, maintaining or editing of their sites, I usually recommend **WordPress**, which requires the least technical background to use effectively. A user reasonably conversant with MS Office will be able to handle WordPress with minimal instruction. But some technical training and basic competency with image editors goes a long way to getting more bang for your buck out of this option.

Site Owners

The critical, and unfortunately most unglamorous part of the process of developing a web site is Content Gathering. But there are ways to organize the work so that it's not so daunting.

To start with, *write stuff down* - don't just think about it and try to keep it all in your head. You'll hit saturation and get bogged down. The first thing you should be thinking about is what the site is for, and what it it meant to do. This can be just a paragraph, think of it as a "Mission Objective." Having a sense of where you want to go can make it a lot less fuzzy getting out of the gate and pointed in the right direction. Maybe this changes or evolves over the course of the project? That's fine, rewrite or add to it, so long as you're not stuck at square one. However, do make sure you mention any shift in focus to your team.

The next part is making what I call *"The Wish List."* Just start scribbling down all the content and features that, in an ideal world, without serious budget constraints, you think should be, or like to have on the site. Don't worry much about organizing or ordering this stuff yet, just brainstorm – have an idea, add it to the list. Don't worry about limits or feasibly just now, just get it down, wether it's in a word processor fine, on paper, or a stack of index cards. Don't worry if you run out of ideas or whims after a while, that might be just fine, maybe you've got all

you need. Ask other folks on your team what other content or features might be good to have, or really needs to be there to meet your objective.

In the process, many clients have existing web sites they love, hate, are kinda okay with, or just plain bored of and want to refresh. An existing site should be reviewed and the content evaluated for what should be retained, reformatted, rewritten, re-designed, or discarded for a new site.

Now before I go on, something VERY IMPORTANT. *Web Sites are not like print.* In a brochure or a book or annual report, you have to have all your content lined up, proofed and edited before you go to press. Once ink gets sprayed on paper, *there it is.* But the web is *different*, however technical, it is *organic–it's all just DATA.* You can launch a web site with just the core, critical content, then *add to it later*, as content is developed, or a new feature, product, news, is added. You can also edit and update, or take down outdated content whenever it suits you. Just make sure that you avoid those horrible "under construction" or "coming soon" notices that send users skittering off to CNN, Disney or 'Net porn. Unless it's already lined up and ready to drop, *don't mention it.* We don't promise *future* content, we ***announce new content***.

Next, go over your list and start to organize it. What stuff belongs together? For instance, "directions" and "contact information" would be related content. Think of it as prepping an outline for a school report. Categories will be top level numbered items, gathering related content. These will most likely translate to top-level Menu Items on the site. Place additional content items in the same category as sub-topics, eventually to become sub-menu items. The first item will likely be your *Home Page*, where you will greet your users with what you want to say, and what you want them to see *first.* Putting your content items on index cards and sliding them around on a table or pinned on a bulletin board till the structure makes sense can be an effective way to visualize your site's... wait for it... *Information Design.* See? It all fits together.

Part of this process will be prioritizing your content dreams. Some material will be critical, and fall into a "absolutely must be there" short list. Other material might be, "we should have this." There will very probably be some "this would be nice to have," or "something we'll add in the future" items. That's all perfectly fine. You might even have a couple of "dream on" bits. Don't throw them away. Who knows what will be possible down the road a bit? But it's rather important to not hold up a site launch for non-critical material that will be difficult to create or collect, or impose unreasonable delays producing. Been down that road, it's frustrating.

Your Designer/Developer will go over this outline to organize the site. He may have recommendations or suggestions based on improving the flow, structure or navigation. Remember that we can also link across pages where desired. They might build a Site Map from your outline to start building the site framework from. Once this is done, the Developer will

begin to break out the bones of the site, essentially make the containers where the proposed content will live. While that process is underway, Site Owners take the topics and material they've outlined, and start to gather up, collect, and create the actual content. This would be text, logos, photography, the actual stuff that will go into the site. Some material you might write in-house, other stuff you might hire writers for. This will be passed on to the Web Designer to pour into the framework of the site, hanging some meat on the site's bones. About this time, the look and feel, or visual Design of the site will be reviewed, evaluated and most probably refined or revised to everyone's satisfaction.

Didn't I mention steak earlier?

Once this is done, the draft site is reviewed, proofread, tested, revised—rinse and repeat till whatever configuration that will be launched is ready to be revealed to the outside world. Again, many sites have a multi-phase process, with content coming online in stages as it is developed.

So again, an outline of the process steps in a typical project:

- Mission Objective
- Wish List Brainstorming
- Organize & Prioritize
- Site Outline
- Content Gathering & Creation
- Draft Site
- Proof, Refine & Revise
- Candidate Site Approval
- Initial Site Launch (or relaunch)

Of course, not all web site projects will have as linear a development process as described. No two sites are the same and your mileage will certainly vary. But these ideas are an outline of some of the best practices I've found to help the process go more smoothly. They are intended to help you not be stuck at the starting gate, and get the most out of your team and time.

Remember that your Web Designer and Developers are *resources*, there to help you get your project online, and they want you to look good!

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