

Designing your website

You can design your website yourself, customising ready-made templates, or using software that simplifies the process. Alternatively, you can hire a web design agency to do it for you.

This briefing covers:

- Deciding what your website is for.
- Deciding whether to do it yourself.
- Maximising the site's impact.

1 What are your objectives?

First, work out what objectives you aim to achieve with your site. Ideally, they should be SMART – specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-limited. Try to track all your objectives.

1.1 Who are you trying to reach? For example, a roofing supplies company may target builders and architects rather than the general public.

1.2 When these people visit your site, **what action** do you want them to take? For example, register for a newsletter, email for more information or place an order.

1.3 If you are intending to **increase sales**, what targets are you setting?

1.4 If you are intending to **save money** by cutting the cost of customer support, what targets are you setting?

1.5 What are the **constraints**?

- You may not be able to publish certain commercially-sensitive information.

2 The three main options

2.1 You can build your website **from scratch**.

- This is a good option if you have in-house expertise, or time to learn.
- Software such as Serif WebPlus or Adobe Dreamweaver makes building a website similar to editing a document in a word processing package. However, these packages do not generally produce the same quality of code you would get from a good design agency.
- Many books cover good web design or you can search online for information.

2.2 You can buy a **fixed-price starter package**, usually based on picking a layout from pre-designed templates.

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- This is the fastest way to set up a website.
- Starter packages can be limited in terms of design and functionality.
- Most web-hosting companies offer starter packages.

2.3 You can appoint a **web design agency** to design an original site for you.

- This is usually the most expensive option, but you will get a highly professional site.
- You will need to work closely with the agency to achieve the website you want.
- A good agency will combine your ideas with their knowledge of what works online.

3 Information to include

3.1 Start with **the essentials**.

- What is your product?

Track your visitors

You can see exactly how people use your website, then use this information to make it better. To do this, you need to install an analytics package onto your website.

- See how many people visit your site and how long they stay.
 - Analyse the paths your customers take and identify where people drop out of the purchasing process.
 - Discover how people find your site and which keywords are working.
 - See average order values and data about repeat visitors. Do they purchase again or just come back for help? Many web hosts include an analytics package as standard. Alternatively, you can install a free package like Google Analytics (www.google.com/analytics) or AWStats (<http://awstats.sourceforge.net/>).
- Commercial analytics packages are available. Ask your designer for advice.
- Once your analytics package is installed, you can view your web statistics by logging in to a website.
 - Try changing one thing at a time on your site, then waiting to see whether it improves your statistics.

The web is the most measurable marketing channel there is. Ensure you make full use of the information available to you.

- Who do you sell to?
- Why should visitors buy from you?
- What are your prices?

Only omit price information if there is a good business reason to do so.

3.2 Provide **up-to-date information**.

- If real-time data is important in your business, link your site to a database for automatic updates.

3.3 Try to provide **something unexpected**.

- Offering a useful service which is unavailable elsewhere will always encourage repeat visits.

3.4 Offer improved **after-sales support**, with tips, FAQs and local contact details.

3.5 Give customers a **number of ways** to contact you.

- Include telephone and fax numbers and your email address.
- Publish your full postal address. This reassures customers you have a 'real world' presence.

People expect quick answers on the internet. They will become impatient if they cannot get what they need quickly.

4 Make it simple

4.1 For clarity, keep pages **uncluttered**.

- People skim read online. So use lots of subtitles and bulleted lists.
- As a general rule, do not have more than about 250 words of text on a page.

4.2 Do not display visitor **number counters** on your pages.

- A low figure looks embarrassing, while a high figure will not be believed.
- Analytics software can show you how visitors use your site. Google Analytics is a good option.

4.3 Only use **techniques** that are appropriate.

- Complex animation, video and sound can be useful, but only if they add something to the experience. You could offer a video demonstration of your product in action.
- Many people now access the web using their mobile phone, so try to create a

mobile-friendly website.

5 Organising your material

5.1 The web is a **dynamic** medium. Change and update your content often.

- Changes to your home page signal to repeat visitors that there is something new to see on your site.

5.2 Make people feel **welcome** the moment they arrive at your home page.

Navigation

Being able to see what is on a site and get around it quickly is important.

If moving around is tricky, potential customers will feel they are wasting time and will quickly lose patience. Online, your competitors are only a click away.

A Give visitors a way to get **straight** to the areas that interest them.

- Include an index, menu bar or set of navigation buttons on your home page.
- A site map can also be useful.

B Many sites benefit from having an internal **search form** on the home page, so that visitors can search by keywords.

- Off-the-shelf packages will let you include a search form without any technical knowledge.

C Keep your navigation **consistent** throughout the site to avoid confusion.

- Most visitors to your site will not enter through the homepage.

D 'Frames' allow the **menu bar** and other elements of the design to stay constantly in view.

But frames have serious disadvantages – there are better solutions.

- Some browsers have problems handling frames, so you may lose visitors.
- Some search engines do not index frames properly.
- Steer clear of any website solution which uses frames.

Try to design your site so you can get from any page to another within three clicks.

- People usually know what they are looking for when they go to a website. Let them know quickly that this is the right place.
- Give visitors immediate payoffs – news, offers, or key information they will want.
- Your proposition should be clear. Customers should immediately understand what your website offers.

5.3 Make **regular customers** feel special.

- Use restricted areas to allow business customers to enter a password and see appropriate prices and discounts.
- Provide an opportunity for regular buyers to record their details permanently, rather than having to enter them on every visit. This is usually achieved by asking customers to log in to the site.

5.4 If you are **selling online**, the design of your site should make it easy for people to buy.

- Anticipate queries and give clear answers.
- Illustrate your products clearly.
- Make order forms easy to find and fill in.
- Reassure nervous buyers with convincing customer testimonials.
- Provide secure facilities for credit card purchases.
- Offer as many payment methods as you can and let buyers choose which to use.
- Spell out the terms of a guarantee.
- Provide clear statements of your data privacy policy and your policy on goods returned and exchanged.
- If you are hoping to make sales overseas, give details of shipping costs and taxes that are likely to apply.

6 How to present it

6.1 Your site must reflect its **objectives**.

- A site that is selling must look and feel dynamic, to encourage visitors to act.
- If you aim to capture names and details of potential customers, offer an incentive to register. For example, a regular newsletter or a members' discount.

6.2 If you need visual material, use **images** from your brochure, scan photos (saving them as jpegs) or take shots with a digital camera.

Check you have permission from the copyright holder to use graphics and photos.

- Generally, keep pictures small.
- When illustrating products, make sure pictures are large enough to see the detail. Let people click them to see a larger image

if necessary.

- There are many sources of free photos online. Try www.morguefile.com or www.sxc.hu, and always check usage restrictions carefully.

6.3 Make sure your website is **integrated** with your traditional marketing activities.

- Include references to your website in your brochures and traditional advertising, and refer to your brochure on your site.

6.4 Ensure your website complies with **disability discrimination legislation** and be prepared to make reasonable adjustments to enable, or make it easier for, disabled people to use the site. For information related to the Disability Discrimination Act, visit the Equality and Human Rights Commission website: www.equalityhumanrights.com.

7 Two-way connections

7.1 Make sure your site can be **found easily**.

- If you had to guess your company's web address, what would your first guess be? That or your product's generic name is the domain name you should register.
- Keep the name short. If you have two words, people must guess if they are separated by a dot, a hyphen or an underscore. Consider simply running them together.
- Ensure the right keywords to help search engines find you are embedded in your site's page titles and 'meta tags'.
- Consider linking to social networking websites such as Facebook or Twitter, where web visitors can follow updates about your firm.

7.2 **Links** bring you visitors, but can also lead people away from your site.

- Include links to related sites, in return for links to yours.
- Keep tempting links off your home page. These links are better placed deeper into your site, when you have had a chance to put your main messages across.
- You can set up links so that they open in a new window and do not take the visitor away from your page.
- Once customers are into the 'buy' process, do not distract them with links to other sites, or other areas of your site.

7.3 Make it easy for customers to **contact** you.

- Every email you receive is a warm lead. Make sure it is obvious how customers can get in touch with you and respond to enquiries quickly.

7.4 **Involve visitors** to your site in doing something, rather than just looking.

- Set up a discussion forum and encourage customers to exchange tips and advice. There are several free packages available, although they may take time to set up.
- Include a survey. Customers like being asked for their opinions and you can gain some genuinely useful feedback.

8 Test your site

8.1 Do not put **anything** on your website without checking it first.

- Check facts and spelling.
- Include a disclaimer if you have doubts about how information on your site is used.
- Check all content for libel. What is on your website can be seen worldwide.
- Check that you have the right to use all the design elements, programming and pictures that form part of your site.

8.2 Do not **launch** your site until you know everything works.

- Check that it looks right on screen. Ask colleagues to take a look.
- View the site at various screen resolutions.
- View and test your pages on all the major browsers, including Microsoft Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox, Google Chrome, Opera and Safari. You can use an online service, like www.browsershots.org, to test different browsers automatically.
- Check all internal and external links work. The W3C link validator at <http://validator.w3.org/checklink> can do this for you.
- Check how your pages print in black and white.

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