

Grab Your Hard Hat – Ten Steps for Successful Web Site Construction

By Deborah J Hoard

After a recent conversation with my brother-in-law, who is a construction project manager, I realized how similar are the building houses and building Web sites. Both require exceptional planning, solid materials, specialized tools, and an experienced team.

As with building a house, you want a Web site that is attractive, solid, and built in the most cost-effective, timely manner possible. However, with building both houses and Web sites, there are so many details to decide, pitfalls to avoid, and considerations to take into account that it can make the experience overwhelming. And, if you are not careful to plan ahead, both constructions can take twice as long and cost three times more than you expected.

To help you produce your dream Web site without any nightmares, I've borrowed ten critical steps from building a house that can be used to construct a Web site easily, efficiently, and quickly.

1. Nail Down Your Site Vision.

As with that dream house you've always wanted, you can see the ultimate Web site in your mind's eye. It makes your customers gasp in amazement. It looks spectacular, has amazing technical gadgets, is the envy of all your competitors, and attracts an astounding number of visitors each day.

However, it is easy to forget, in all the excitement of building a new site, what its main purpose is: to convey key information to your customers in an easy-to-use format. Yes, you want bells and whistles on your site. But just like building a house, if you forget the basics and only concentrate on the decorative, you won't end up with what you really need.

Your goal at this stage: Make a wish list of everything you'd possibly want on your site, even if it seems out of reach. It is easier to delete items than to add them later in the process.

The first steps:

- Decide what goals you want to accomplish with your site. What do you want it to do for you? Educate your audience? Make sales? Who is your target audience? What type of image do you want to project? What marketing messages do you want to convey? How will you convince customers to purchase from you? Will they use the site to purchase from you?
- Browse the Web for competitors' sites and other sites of interest. Produce a list of what you like and don't like. Include the URLs as examples for your writer, designer, and Web programmer.
- Identify what bells and whistles you want, such as a blog, Flash, animated .gif files, pop-up windows, etc.

2. Be a Great Host – Build from Your Visitor's Perspective.

What most companies forget is that they are not building a site that they will be using, but one that their customers will use. Think of it in terms of building a guesthouse versus building a house in which you will live.

Your goal at this stage: List all the elements from your customer's viewpoint that need to be considered.

Ask yourself: How will your visitors use the site? What information is most important to them? How will they move most logically from page to page? If they get lost, what markers will show them where they are and where they might want to go?

Customers who have to spend more than ten seconds or have to work to get the information they need will leave your site in frustration – and will not be tempted to return.

3. Location, Location, Location.

In real estate, the physical location in a neighborhood determines the value of the property. For Web sites, there are three location considerations: server, ISP, and search engine.

Your goal at this stage: Make sure your location will be a firm foundation on which to build.

The server that hosts your site needs to be robust enough to handle the amount of user traffic so the pages load quickly. Even in large companies, server space is at a premium. Keep server specifications in mind as you plan.

Choose a stable Internet service provider (ISP) to carry the bits and bytes of your site to your visitors. While no ISP can guarantee 100 per cent uptime, you need to make sure that the one you select has enough resources to provide as close to than amount of time as possible.

Where is your site going to land during a search engine request? Near the top or buried on page 20? While there are complicated algorithms that determine placement, there are three major factors over which you have control: key words, links from other sites, and purchasing placement. A search engine optimization (SEO) firm can help you determine the best strategy to pursue.

4. Create a Blueprint.

You've heard the carpenter's saying: "Measure twice. Cut once." This is a good philosophy to also apply to Web site development.

Your goal at this stage: Develop a plan for a site that conveys the information your customers most want and is easy to use and fast to download.

With your team, review the wish list and key considerations you've gathered during the first three steps and hammer out the details. This is a crucial stage of your Web site development. The more time you spend at this stage, the fewer headaches you'll encounter, and the more time and money you can save.

Your plan should contain the following elements:

- A navigational map – This can be a flow chart or PowerPoint document that shows the architecture of the site, including the main sections, the hierarchy of the pages, and the page flow.
- Bells and whistles – List what and where each will appear. This is where you weed out your wish list and decide exactly what the site will contain. Your team will be able to recommend cost-effective ways to get the effect you want, and you can determine if the cost justifies the effect. You might want to consider adding the bells and whistles in phases over several months.
- Special considerations – List any corporate branding, design, technical, and marketing specifications that need to be incorporated. Include the browsers, operating systems, and platforms on which you want the site to function.
- Budget – Be sure to break down your budget into specific components, such as writing, designing, and programming.
- Schedule – Include not only the final delivery date but also key milestones you need to meet along the way and the person responsible for that action item. Don't forget the "freeze" date when no further content or design changes can be made; this allows the Web programmer to finish the coding and have time to perform quality control.
- Search engine strategy – Even if you don't hire an SEO firm, you still need to consider the following: if you are paying for search engine placement, the elements in your site that will interest search engines (key words, metatags, etc.), what will repel them (such as an all-Flash home page or too many dynamically generated pages), and to which other sites your site can be cross-linked.

- Announcement – Outline how you will be announcing your Web site to your employees, customers, press, and analysts.
- Maintenance plan – Your plan should answer the following questions: How are you going to keep the site content relevant to the user? How will you entice users to return to your site? How often will content be updated? Who is responsible? How will you measure who the user is, how often they visit, and how long they stay? Is there a high click-through rate? Are there any broken links?

5. Appoint a General Contractor.

On a house construction job, the general contractor is the person who guides the team to turn the blueprint into reality. One turnkey person on the project makes it run more smoothly.

The same thing applies to Web site construction. A project manager who translates your plan, handles the daily interaction with the team, and leads the team to a successful delivery will be invaluable – and will save you costly errors in time and budget. If you also need to hire vendors, the project manager is the individual to identify and manage them.

Your goal at this stage: Assign an experienced project manager who understands your marketing goals and can speak the team's language.

6. Assemble Your Materials.

Just as using inferior materials for your house will be apparent, so will inferior Web content and design.

Your goal at this stage: Engage the best writer and designer possible to create the materials for your site and, ideally, to finalize both the content and design before handing them to your programmer.

A writer who is experienced at writing for the Web can recommend content organization, determine the key concepts to convey, weave in key words, and, of

course, write the copy. In addition, they can be sure that the tone and language is used properly to reflect your company and products or services.

At a minimum, your copy should cover:

- What your company does – What services or products are offered?
- The benefits your services or products offer – Why should potential customers buy from you? Do you have any customer success stories to illustrate your claims?
- Your Value Proposition – How do you differentiate your company from the competition?
- Call to action – What do you want your customers to do? How do they order? How do they contact you?

A talented Web designer will help you avoid the typical design pitfalls. In designing the look and feel of the site, you need to consider the following:

- Your company brand – Make sure the site is in alignment with your print materials so you don't create confusion in your customers' minds.
- The fonts – Easy-to-read fonts to which everyone has access are better than specialized fonts that your visitors can't read.
- The colors – The colors should reflect your brand. However, keep in mind that colors look different on different browsers and computers. You also want to choose colors that have enough contrast between the text and the background to make the pages as easy to read as possible.
- Graphics – While graphics enhance any page, they can cause pages to download more slowly if there are too many on a page or are too large.
- Your Web programmer – Involving your Web programmer in design reviews eliminates nasty surprises later.

7. Build Your Site.

Once the content is written and the templates are designed, the Web programmer can start building the site. As in building a house, this is the point where costs and time can escalate if changes to the architecture are made. A simple navigational change request can cause hours of re-coding for your programmer. Your project manager will be an invaluable resource to guide the team through this critical phase.

Your goal at this stage: Keep changes to a minimum.

8. Have the Site Inspected.

A building inspector makes certain that everything on your house is solid and built to code. The building inspectors that do the same job for your site are your Web programmer, proofreader, and fellow employees.

Your goal for this stage: Ensure that the site works before it is pushed live.

Your Web programmer should run programs to check for broken links and any coding errors. The proofreader will catch any grammatical and spelling errors. Fellow employees can test a beta site and report any user problems.

9. Have a Housewarming Party.

Once your site is completed, make sure you invite people through press releases, email blasts, and personal invitations to see it. At traditional housewarming parties, your visitors bring you gifts. In this case, you might want to offer them a gift, such as a promotional discount or a special report, to visit the site.

This is also the time to implement your search engine optimization plan to extend your invitation to as many of your target audience as possible.

10. Maintain Your Site.

Completing the building of your house is not the end of your responsibility. If you don't constantly maintain it, your house will eventually fall down around you.

The same can happen with your Web site. Stale content, broken links, and outdated information will cause your customers to stop visiting your site.

Your goal for this stage: Develop and implement a maintenance plan that will continually keep your site fresh.

The maintenance plan should contain:

- Monthly checks for broken links
- Monthly updates to content
- Quarterly usage reports to analyze trends
- Annual review of design and navigation

Following these ten steps will provide you with a replicable process for Web site development, help you avoid common mistakes, keep your costs and schedule in control, and enable you to keep your sanity during construction. You will also build a Web site that is attractive, informational, and efficient – and keep your visitors coming back for more.

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