A Brief Primer
in
Strategic Website Design

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"Superior tactical tools, even in the absence of a strategic initiative will win most battles. Tactical tools alone, however, have never won, and will never win a war.   *Egg*

"Technology Should Set You Free, Not Make You Crazy" (sm)

So you want a Website!

Before you think further about producing a new Website, or updating an existing one, take the time to work through the questions and forms presented here.

I can guarantee that if you do, you will save a significant amount of time and money. But, as they say on TV, there's more! As a bonus, you gain a more effective Internet presence and a more professional public image at a comparative minimum expense.

A Website is a powerful tactical tool. Unless it's well integrated into your strategic plan, however, it will be little more than an expensive business card and could even harm your mission.

You have to make hundreds of decisions when designing a Website. Colors, fonts, photos, look and feel, where do you put the logo and how big and who will host it are usually some of the first questions that come to mind. Unfortunately, these decisions are usually best left until you are well underway.

Form and Function do not have to be mutually exclusive, but on the Web, as with software design, function always comes first. I don't care how pretty it is, if the visitor can't get what they want, you've lost them.

In this brief paper I hope to help you 'reorient' your thinking a bit, and ask the critical questions up-front, before the first bit of content gets dropped on any Web page.

I have included a set of Web Worksheets with this document. You are free to use and adapt these as you see fit.

Only after you carefully consider the issues I spotlight here, and answer at least the *five critical questions,* should you even think about what your Website will look like.

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National Telecommunications Cooperative Association Annual Meeting
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American Seed trade Association Annual Meeting
201ˢᵗ Airlift Squadron - Onsite Seminar
Playboy Enterprises- Onsite Seminar

1. Get Away From That Computer!

"At least 80% of the design of your Website should be completed before the first actual Web page is outlined or the first graphic produced."

Yes, you heard right. In a *Properly Designed and Executed* Web project, generally less than 20% of the actual work should involve laying out pages, making graphics and writing code. The bulk of the work (80%) is completed and approved before the first color or graphic is chosen.

Don't even think about colors, fonts, appearance and general cosmetics in the beginning of your project. Each "Web page" under development should be little more than an empty rectangle on a piece of paper with a spot for notes and the answers to some critical questions.

In today's high-tech, computerized and paperless world, the bulk of your site should still be done on paper rather than a computer. OK, maybe not literally, but I consider a Word Processing Document or Spreadsheet to be 'virtual paper,' and that's where your site should be designed. Yellow pads and 3 x 5 file cards are the initial design medium of choice.

All too often someone will say, "We need a Website!" They immediately start drawing Web pages on a pad. "We need a page about us, and a page about our products and some sort of feedback form. We'll call it thebestwidgetsintheworldcomefromacmewidgetsincorporated.com. Oh boy, oh boy, we're gonna have a Website"

Actually, if that's all you need, you can get it quickly, and at little cost in either time or money. *Template based* websites, complete with feedback forms and a surprising bunch of bells, whistles and eye-candy may be had for under Twenty dollars per month, with an initial setup cost of less than a hundred bucks. If you're willing to take the time and make the effort to learn the ins and outs of some of these low-cost services, you can put together a pretty good-looking Website all by yourself.

"Oh yeah—*just one other thing*—it should look sort of like this, and be sort of like the Acme Corp site, but we want a splash page that says 'yadda yadda yadda' with a big flashing CLICK HERE TO ENTER OUR SITE button. And can you put a waving Flag on the home page and make the National Anthem play when it starts up? People like that because it's patriotic, and these days – well you know? And we want people to be able to order Widgets online too. Oh, and we need a Members Only area and can you make it so my son can maintain it—he's taking a Web design class in high school next year."

Here is where you may suddenly encounter a multitude of hungry weasels including the incompetent Web developer. (No disrespect to your son intended.)

The biggest rodent lurking in this nest, however, is that **the public image and reputation of you and/or your business is at stake**. Remember, "The Internet never forgets!"

If your Website is a template based, *"Here's who we are, what we do and how to get in touch with us"* site, it's better than no site at all for certain. It is, however, only an 'online business card.' It is a great way to end a conversation on a PR note. "I'm in a hurry right now, but drop by our website. You can find out more and contact me there. Ciao!" But you want more don't you?

But, before you start thinking about, or rethinking **your** Internet presence, get comfortable yourself with the Internet and "Take Notes." Spend some quality time surfing similar companies or sites. See what the competition is doing and again **Take Notes!**

The notes you take about what you like are important. **The notes about what you don't like, however, are critical.**

How many times have you been through this?

"Hmmm I think I'll buy some Widgets online."

> *"Gee, I wish this Website had a […]*
> *How the #$!@)_!&@# do I get back to the home page?*
>
> *I wonder how much do they cost?*
> *Peck...peck...peck… "cost of widgets"* [SEARCH]
> *Yes, I know that...(click!)*
> *Yes, I know that...(click!)*
> *No I don't want that...(click!)*
> *Yes, I know that...(click!)*
> *No I don't want that...(click!)*
> *Yes, I know that...(click!)*
> *Doggone it, I just told you that! ... (click)*
> *No I don't want that...(click!)*

"Please Wait --- Searching . . . . . ." *(Whew, finally!)*

```
"ERROR Q2127826478q245 Subpart6.20580495
gfjsotu,IETF895BOZO9475(*(#$^g" Param_MaxLen exceeded
thebestwidgetsintheworldcomefromacmewidgetsincorporated.com

Please contact the webmaster
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ERROR 404 – PAGE NOT FOUND

"How the #$!@)_!&@# do I get back to the home page?

"Oh the &*(%#^*+ with it!

END OF POTENTIAL CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP

Or How about …

Visit Our Website for a Valuable Offer!

"(Hmmm, OK --- 'peck peck peck…',"
thebestwidgetsintheworldcomefromacmewidgetsincorporated.com[click]

wait … wait … wait … wait …

"WELCOME TO OUR SITE CLICK HERE TO ENTER"

[click]

wait … wait … wait … wait …

WELCOME!

wait … wait … wait … wait …

Your business is very important to us. Please take ten minutes out of your otherwise trivial and unimportant [to us] life and give us your name, address, e-mail, first-born, PIN Number and lots of other very personal information and we'll reward you by putting you on our ~~SPAM~~ mailing list of exciting news and offers! (*By the way, we've also just cluttered up your system with a bunch of cookies, spyware and other junk you don't want or need*)

We've all been there!

Don't make promises you don't keep!
If you say come back on the 17th for a valuable offer, you had better have a valuable offer *(from the visitor standpoint)* ready on or before the 17th.

In other words, the things that piss you off probably piss off the other guy. (T.O.G.= your market)

You should endeavor to discover most of the 'gee, I knew that,' and (just as important) 'hmmm, I didn't think about that' stuff on paper, while your costs and risks are low.

A Few More Pointers

Keep your ego out of it!
Just because YOU happen to think Flashing Green text on a Red Background is a sexy theme for the Holiday promotion doesn't mean that everyone does. Get lots of opinions from the people who matter most, *the people who will be using your site.*

Form a "Red Team."
Far too many Websites are designed and produced with little to no 'End User' input. That's one of the things that make so many sites so bad.

Your Red team should be a small but representative group (3-5 people, maximum) from your target market. As your site develops, bring the Red Team into the process, asking for their opinions and comments. Then, listen to that team. You, as a manager, may THINK the visitors want something that may be completely at odds with what they need. After all, the site is being designed for the end user. (The Visitor) It's not about you, your marketing department, the PR folks or the boss.

Ask and Answer (at least) **the 5 Basic Questions.**
Answering just a few basic questions can increase your chances of success.
Why is this site here?
Why would someone come to it?
Once they are there, why would they stay?
Once they've been there, why would they want to come back?
Why would another Website want to link to mine?

Until the answers to at least those five simple questions are clearly and concisely defined, you are essentially wasting your time and money and shouldn't go any further.

Won't the Web Designer/Developer you hire take care of all of this stuff?

Hopefully, the first few words out of a prospective designer/developers mouth will be to ask *at least* the *Five Critical Questions.* If this is not the case, perhaps you should consider another designer.

Even if you are using an outside design/development service, the critical questions still have to be answered. You can save yourself a great deal of time and money by having the answers ready, right up front.

> 1) Why is this site here?
> 2) Why would someone come to it?
> 3) Once they are there, why would they stay?
> 4) Once they've been there, why would they want to come back?

About the Author

Stephen Eggleston brings more than 35 years of education, training and diverse, real world experience to the classroom, boardroom, broadcast studio and lecture hall. He is an acknowledged expert in Internet publishing, communications, user interface design, presentation graphics, photography, marketing and knowledge management. Rumored to have associations with a number of three-letter agencies, he is author of numerous articles, editorials and technical papers. His talent for making complex subjects understandable is reflected in his contributions to textbooks, references and on-line course materials from secondary to post-graduate levels.

He spent a number of years as a public speaker and on-air personality. His seminars, keynotes and training programs on presentations, speaking, management, quality, technology and the Internet are popular among small business and fortune 100 companies alike.

Eggleston is currently serving as Director of Internet Technology for a leading importer and distributor of extraordinarily fine wines and a superb line of grappas and specialty spirits.

Website Key Items

Mission Statement: _____
25 Words or fewer – "What is the purpose of this Website?"

_____

_____

Target Market(s): _____
Reasonably precise demographics of the desired audience.

_____

_____

Site Draw(s): _____
What is/are the compelling reason(s) a member of the target market would visit the site?

_____

_____

_____

Site Sticky: _____
Once a visitor enters, what do you offer to keep them there?

_____

_____

_____

Bookmark/Return Reason: _____
Why will a visitor feel a need to bookmark your site for a return visit?

_____

_____

_____

Recommendation Potential: _____
Why would someone recommend your site to a friend or associate or add a link to your Website on theirs?

_____

_____

Meta Description: _____

240 Character Maximum – Concise Description of the Website for the Home Page. (Shows Up in Some Search Engine Listings)

_____

_____

_____

Database Requirements

Visitor Information to Collect: _____

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Site Information to Store: _____

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Outgoing E-Mail Requirements:

E-Mails the Server Should Send: *(Thank You, Automated Reply, etc)* _____

_____
_____

Autoresponder(s) Required? _____

List manager(s) Required?   _____   Number of Lists _____

Incoming E-Mail Requirements:

Addresses: (Attach Additional Sheets if Necessary)
Approximate Number of E-Mail Addresses required: _____

_____, _____, _____, _____, _____
_____, _____, _____, _____, _____
_____, _____, _____, _____, _____
_____, _____, _____, _____, _____
_____, _____, _____, _____, _____
_____, _____, _____, _____, _____
_____, _____, _____, _____, _____
_____, _____, _____, _____, _____
_____, _____, _____, _____, _____
_____, _____, _____, _____, _____

Online Forms Required (See Also Database Above)

Feedback: _____

Contact Us: _____

Contest Entry: _____

Join List: _____

Other: _____

_____

E-Commerce

Will you need a Shopping Cart? _____

Approximate Number and type of Items: _____

Will a Payment Gateway be required? _____

_____

Accept: _ MC, _Visa, _ Amex, _ Discover, _ Pay-Pal, _ Other: _____

Do you have Merchant Accounts/Gateways already in place?_____

_____

DNS

Requested Domain Names: Primary: _____ Additional: _____

_____

Are these already registered? _____   If not, what is your required term of registration? _____ Years

Notes: (Use the Back of Page or Attach Additional Pages if Necessary)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Individual Web Document Design Worksheet

Page Title: _____ ID No:_____

Path/Filename: _____

Why Does This Web Page Exist? (If you can't answer this, toss this page right now!)

_____

_____

Description: (For Search Engine Indices) _____

_____

_____

Key Words (use in Paragraph Text and Image Alternates: _____

_____

_____

NOTES/SKETCHES: (Use the Back of Page or Attach Additional Pages if Necessary)

Contents of this Page: _____

_____

_____

Link to This Page From: _____

_____

Link This Page To: _____

_____