



CONCEIVING YOUR WEBSITE & ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY: *A Helpful Guide*

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For most of us, an effective web site is an essential tool in today's world, and now the opportunities for connecting with your audience have been optimized with blogs, newsletters, and other online tools. This Guide will give you some basic information on each option, and focus attention on your website.

YOUR WEBSITE

Creating a communications strategy that successfully reflects your vision and speaks directly to your audience takes careful thought and planning. Your website is the 'anchor' for this communications constellation (*I use the term 'website' throughout this guide, but keep it in mind that a well-designed blog may serve your purpose just as well or better in many cases*). It gives the basic sense of who you are and what you do, and serves as a container for all the material you want to have available for your audience or community. If you already have one, check to make sure it reflects who you are *now*, and still attracts the audience you are serving or want to serve.

If you don't yet have a website, now is the time to consider a few important questions that will repay your investment in time and money a thousand times.

BEYOND YOUR WEBSITE

A website is a crucial cornerstone for setting out your business (or personal) offerings, but after that is done you will want to have the elements in place that will drive traffic to your new site, and make

sure you are doing what is necessary to serve the needs of your existing clients/audience and grow your community of new ones. There are several options to consider, from very basic to advanced. You don't need to do everything at once but it is helpful to have an overview of your online strategy from the beginning. Having a clear view of where you want to go helps make getting there easier, even if you decide to develop your vision in stages.

Formally announcing your website is one of the first things you can do to begin to draw together your community, and staying in touch with the people who are interested in what you are doing is of primary importance to most online enterprises. Therefore, you might find helpful to consider integrating a way of capturing contact details from the people who will be visiting your site into your website plans. These new addresses are very important, because they represent people who are actively interested in your work and if you invite them in a way that speaks to them, a good percentage will become your new clients, audience, friends & collaborators.

I have written more on some of these tools and techniques that help connect and communicate with your audience, in a separate guide, *Beyond your Website*.

PLAN CAREFULLY

Unplanned or poorly-planned web sites can spiral out of control, wasting your time, energy and money. They can confuse your readers, undermine your credibility and actually devalue your services.

But with some forethought your web site can be an effective and beautiful tool - a great resource for your customers that contributes greatly to your objectives.

Your website and other online communications reflect you and your organization, and express your vision and message to the world. They create a distinct environment that you are inviting others to enter, in order to interact with you and your offerings.

It's clear that the care you put into thinking about your website now will repay you many times over in time and money, beginning from the point you decide to engage the services of an online communications professional to help you build it. So, where do you start?

CLARIFY YOUR PURPOSE

What is *your* reason for creating this web site? What do you want it to do for you?

Having a definite purpose will help focus your efforts; each element of your web site needs to help you accomplish this goal. So, take some time to think about yours, and write it down, so that you are clear and can articulate it accurately to your designer.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Decide whom your web site is for and think about what they might need/want from it. If your web site is going to be addressing your customers, are they current or potential clients - or does it need to be designed for both? Is your audience local, national or international? What cultures - of age, nationality, income, etc. - does it need to reach?

One of the most important things to know is to resist the natural tendency to tell your readers more than they need or want to know. Focus on their needs, not yours, Ask yourself:

- Why are they coming to your website?
- What will give them delight, and make them want to return?

It's your job to provide beneficial, relevant and current information for your readers. To create a web site that truly benefits them, take the time to research these areas.

IDENTIFY YOUR KEYWORDS

This is one of the most important things you can do to maximize the effectiveness of your website and optimize your online visibility. Take time to think about the essence of your message, and the key words that will most accurately express what you want to convey.

Imagine that you are your ideal customer, trying to find you and your services on the internet. What words would you enter in a search engine?

Write down about 20 of those key words and phrases that you think would be most effective in describing you to our ideal audience and give them to your designer. Wherever possible she will integrate these words into your page titles, image tags, etc. to help optimize your search engine find-ability. When you are writing copy for your site, these are the words you will want to use as often as is appropriate.

RESEARCH

Start by doing some research - use your keywords to search out your competition. Find and observe web sites with similar purposes to the one you envision. What are the keywords they are using? (You can usually find this information near the top of the page in the 'source code' view, but if you have questions, note the urls to send to your designer and she can identify them for you.) Question whether these keywords might also be effective for you. Note those people and organizations you find that you might want to be allied or associated with, if appropriate.

Beyond keywords, what do you find useful or informative on their sites?

Look at each section with an eye to how it benefits you, the reader. What is this person or organization trying to communicate and accomplish through their web site? What is their main goal (i.e., is it to sell products, gather contact details or subscriptions from their readers, give information about a subject?) Is their purpose obvious and clear?

Note the design of the site, specifically the:

- ❖ Color/s
- ❖ Use of images
- ❖ Logo & logo placement
- ❖ Fonts
- ❖ Page layouts, especially navigation placement and wording

- ❖ Is there an invitation to participate in some way?

How does each element add to your experience of comfort, ease, excitement, etc. or take away from it?

After visiting a few sites, you'll have a better idea of what you find attractive and effective and what you don't like. Keep these preferences in mind as you plan your own website. Jot down your thoughts, as well as urls for sites you particularly like and don't like, to share with your designer. This step can save you both a lot of costly trial and error attempts in matching your expectations and desires with reality.

POSITIONING STATEMENT

Studies show that you have 12 seconds to explain why visitors to your site should be interested in you. If you don't clearly articulate your offerings by then, it's likely you will lose their interest, and they will move on.

A successful positioning statement succinctly tells visitors who you are, what you do and how you can help them. Positioning statements are placed on your home page, and designed to grab your reader's attention and relate to their issues. Perhaps you will find the most effective first message is actually an image, or largely image-based.

Effective positioning statements:

- ❖ Are no longer than 2-3 sentences
- ❖ Are written with your audience's needs in mind
- ❖ Outline your strategy for addressing these needs

Can you describe your offering/s in less than a paragraph? If not, your web site is unlikely to be effective in articulating the value you bring to your readers.

Many people are too close to their own vision to create a compelling positioning statement. They tend to promote products & services, rather than benefits to the reader. Check your positioning

statement with trusted clients, friends & colleagues to see if the benefits you offer are clear.

OUTLINE

Every web site needs an outline. Even the most complex and intricate site can be broken down into a simple, easy to follow structure.

Start by identifying the main elements that you need to have represented in your web site. For example, your site will probably need to have an “About Us” section, a section for Products, Services or Publications, a Bio and some way to contact you.

Once you have completed your list of main sections, you should start filling in the specifics you want to cover within each area, and any additional pages you would like to include. Each page on your site should fit within one of the main sections in your outline. If it’s not clear where a new page belongs, add a new section or question whether the page(s) belong in your web site at all.

A complete outline, organized into a hierarchial structure in order of importance, helps you and your web designer create a clear and manageable site. Taking the time to complete these easy steps before you start will save you considerable time, money, and stress as you build your site. It also helps your designer give you an accurate estimate of how much time and money will be needed to produce it.

“LOOK AND FEEL”

The look and feel of your site is the overall impression your reader has when they visit your site, which is usually summarized as a visual ‘gestalt’ on your front, or home, page.

As you might imagine, the graphic elements on your site are as important as your copy in communicating who you are and what you can do for your audience. By graphic elements I am speaking here of your font style and size, choice of photographs or other images, the way you use space and color, and the decision to include elements such as movement or sound.

The choices you make in this area impact your audience in subtle but powerful ways, and may in many cases carry significantly more 'weight' in conveying information about you and your 'brand' than what you actually say about yourself.

There a number of elements to consider in creating your site's 'look and feel':

Color

Used judiciously and carefully, color is one of your most powerful tools in presenting a strong and effective site. Strong bright colors indicate boldness, youth, vitality and creativity, while more neutral colors tend to connote maturity, dependability, professionalism and practicality. Soft or muted colors can communicate a more 'personal' style.

Pleasing color combinations and a sense of continuity between pages is crucial, so as not to affront your reader's sensibilities or jar their eye, unless you decide to use color consciously to hold or catch their attention in a specific way. Effective use of color throughout your site will allow you to highlight the elements you want to focus on or unobtrusively lead your reader's eye where you want it to go.

For a successful 'look and feel', choose colors that will resonate with your audience and be compatible with the purpose you've outlined for your site.

Images

Graphic images are useful in breaking up long blocks of text and inserting a welcome visual variety to your pages. They can also, in the case of diagrams, impart useful information in an immediate and accessible manner.

Photographs of your work or products offer an immediate appreciation of what it is you are showcasing. Similarly, diagrams or simple line drawings can make information easier to understand and/or offer a feeling of comfort and familiarity, while art and

more complex illustrations can bring a more nuanced or dramatic flair to your work.

Images of nature can evoke a sense of space or freedom, wonder and beauty, while those of people are effective for sharing a sense of teamwork and common purpose. Flash animations indicate a level of technological creativity and style that can impress and delight a more sophisticated audience, but leave many others cold or unable to participate because of technical limitations.

Again, choose your images with regard to your own aesthetic sense, the tastes of your specific audience, and the needs of your stated purpose.

Font

Generally speaking, large areas of online text are easier to read in a sans-serif font, unlike the printed word, where the opposite is true (if you are unsure about the differences between a serif or sans-serif font, ask your designer for clarification). Calligraphic or decorative type can be fun and elegant used in titles or small quantities, e.g. quotes, but will affect readability if used extensively.

Sections of text in contrasting fonts can also be utilized effectively as visual images within larger blocks of copy.

Format and Style

Matters such as the size of your page, and the decision to use flash animation, or 'tables' rather than 'frames', and vice versa effect the accessibility of your site as well as the way it looks. You want to be sure there is enough 'white' space so that the reader doesn't feel crowded, and their eye can easily follow in the direction you lead.

This is an area where your designer is trained to help direct your choices, but you can do a lot yourself by doing some research online and paying close attention to what you like and don't like in the sites you visit. When you share these observations with your designer, you will be able to work together to create a site that

pleases you, and is both beautiful and effective at reaching your target audience.

CONTENT

After deciding on the audience you're addressing, and the basic structure of your web site, it is time to start writing your copy. Writing web content is challenging for most people, as it can feel like an overwhelming task to outline your entire business or personal philosophy, but you can be sure that your efforts to create clear and concise copy will be a great asset and well worth the time you put into them.

Search Optimization & Meta Tags

These days search engines use the general copy in your site (along with internal information like page titles, image names, etc.) as the primary source for their search 'spiders', so choose language that clearly depicts your purpose and vision, drawing frequently from the list of keywords you created earlier for terms people searching for you will be likely to use.

You will also need a sentence or two for your 'description' meta tag, which is the text that comes up under your site's url in the search engine result page. Usually a modified version of your position statement is the best choice for your description meta tag.

Writing for the Web

Writing for the web is very different from writing for printed media, primarily because web readers are notoriously impatient. They are used to having so much information available to them that, unless the information is very interesting to them, they will quickly move on. In a practical sense, what this means to you is that you must cut your copy to convey the essence of your message with a minimum of words.

Here are some basic guidelines to remember while you are putting together your content:

- ❖ Make your writing voice personal; speak directly to individuals, rather than a generic group. This will make your site feel friendly and approachable

- ❖ Write as if you are addressing an ideal reader. Focus on their needs and desires, not on what you want to sell or promote
- ❖ Stick to your outline to help you avoid irrelevant content
- ❖ Avoid flashy technology; unless it is directly applicable or well-planned, it can be distracting and detract from your message
- ❖ Use short paragraphs and simple sentences. Most people find it difficult to read excessive amounts of text on their computers, no matter how interested they are.
- ❖ If you do need to put a lot of information on a page, consider putting the data in a downloadable pdf file, or at least make sure it can be printed out easily.
- ❖ Utilize bullets & spacing to highlight key points and help your reader focus on your message
- ❖ Bold key phrases to be sure people catch them while they skim your pages
- ❖ Your links should ideally be part of your sentence: for example: rather than “To contact us, Click Here”, try “Contact us for more information”
- ❖ Use contractions whenever possible. They’re easier to read

Internet Conventions

There is value in going against convention, but like any great artist, you have to understand a convention in order to subvert it. In any case, you need to be aware of some standard Internet ‘rules’:

- ❖ Links on a website show up in a separate color (usually blue as a default) and they are usually underlined, so beware of underlining text for any other purpose in your copy, and be careful of using separate colors for words or groups of words other than titles
- ❖ Creative section and page titles can personalize or bring humor to your pages, but be sure their meaning is clear

Keep your audience, goal and outline close at hand throughout your writing progress, and you’ll be fine. You might find it helpful to ask

your friends (or your enemies!) to review and critique your work as you go along, but trust your self and remember that you know your purposes and business better than anyone else does.

FINALLY

Most important of all - have fun! Creating a web site is a creative process that shows others who you are, and what you find important. It is a journey of self-discovery and disclosure - and a way to connect with others on a meaningful level. Working with a sympathetic designer you trust will make the whole process a very fulfilling & creative one for you. Enjoy!

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