

Making your web site a success - Part 2

Bruce McGregor, Multimedia Development Manager of PDMS Advanced Systems Group

Jan 1999

This is the fourth of a series of articles dealing with the practical applications of the Internet in business. Last month we focused on the marketing aspects of making your web site a success. This month we aim to give practical advice about the content and design of your web site.

As we highlighted last month, if your site is of poor quality then even the best marketing may not persuade visitors to come back again or even get past the first page. There are several important considerations that must be taken into account when designing the site and its content.

Planning and Content

Before any of the actual site development process takes place a number of questions need to be answered. What is your web site for? Or more to the point, who is it for? Is the purpose of the site to provide: detailed company information; technical details; general sales and marketing information; e-commerce or as with many sites, all of these. The site design and content will need to reflect the balance of the answers to these questions. A good web site puts the needs of its users first.

Because of the nature of web sites and the technology involved they can easily be put on-line when only at a juvenile stage. This is often termed as "acquiring a web presence". Over time this web presence then evolves into a full and concise web site covering many or all aspects of a company and its business. However, as a result of this evolutionary process, many sites become more and more unwieldy as the information available on the site increases. It is therefore important to design a framework for your site from the outset which allows for this evolutionary process.

It is important to update the content of the site regularly. Once your site gets the reputation of being severely outdated then the user will stop coming there and it will prove difficult to get them back to your site.

A site should be clean, clear and simple with succinct content which should be written for the web site or at least be a specifically edited version of currently available information. Don't forget spelling and grammar; if in doubt get the content proofed or professionally written.

The User's Needs

In answering the question "Does my web site satisfy the needs of my users?" the designer needs to consider the users technology as well as the information and content requirements. How are they connected to the Internet? What browser are they using and what version is it? What about monitor size, resolution and colour depth? All these factors may affect the way a site is designed. Generally before putting a site together a decision has to be made as to what the site will support from a technical point of view as this can radically affect the final design, e.g., will the site support frames or Java?

Page Design and Site Structure

A good web site includes the organisation's identity on each page. Don't forget users may enter your site from any point and so they need to be able to answer the question "Where am I?" Having made sure the user knows where they are you then need to answer the question "Where will they want to go?" A good site will answer this question by providing a clear and consistent layout with an easy to use, intuitive navigation menu. Try to keep the number of initial navigation items on a menu down to a sensible level and use a clear and obvious hierarchy. A consistent layout builds site identity in the mind of the user and helps them visualise your site structure. If your site has a large number of sections or information then provide a 'within site' search page so users can quickly and easily find what they are looking for in your site.

A web site should be pleasing to the eye. Overloading pages with masses of graphics or unnecessary animations only serves to distract from the content and severely affects the download time of a page. Special effects can be used in some cases but only really if they add to the value of the site. Download time is one of the most critical factors and is particularly important with the key entry pages of a site. If a page takes too long to load the user will become impatient and go elsewhere. If you do have some essential large content then make sure the user is aware of this before they go to that page or download that particular item.

Avoid having large amounts of information on a single page. Most users don't like to scroll too much, in fact many of them will not scroll past what they see on the initial part of a page so the content at the top of the screen is critical. Many users will decide whether to stay or to leave based on what they see when the page first loads. If a page does have a reasonable amount of content then make sure there is sufficient vertical navigation within the page itself. This means the user will be able to locate particular sections with ease. If a particular section is important but too weighty to put on the site then provide a downloadable version of the document for interested users to view at their leisure.

Make sure all the links on a site work otherwise the navigational structure you have spent time designing will breakdown and users will become frustrated. Particularly important is to include some kind of feedback mechanism. This can range from a simple e-mail address link to a more complex user entry feedback page with specific items that can be requested. Ensure all the pages of your site have meaningful titles and descriptions, as these will be used if the particular page is indexed by a search engine and make sure that relevant pages contain all the necessary keywords.

Summary

To summarise, it is important to design a framework for your web site from the outset considering both the objectives of your site and your customer's needs. It should be both fast to download and easy and intuitive to use. The next articles in this series will move on to topics including Intranets & Extranets and electronic commerce.

Published in Money Media, January 1999