

Seven Habits of Highly Effective Web Sites

Web sites are uncommonly complex projects, requiring "uncommon sense". Here are seven habits to help your Web site fulfill its promise.

1. Start with a strategic plan.

No matter how much effort, money, and technology we invest in our Web site, if we haven't agreed on what we're trying to achieve, the likelihood of gaining valuable business results is thin.

Often, people tend to start designing a Web site before having agreed upon desired results. They may fear that by starting with strategy, the project will simply take too long. However, while it's true that they'll start designing later, it's also true that they'll reach their goals sooner.

Everyone on the project team should be able to answer the question "How will we know when we've succeeded?" and so the first step of every strategy is to set measurable objectives. Be careful to describe minimum desired results (not methods, but outcomes) as part of a strategic plan written in a vocabulary everyone on the project team can understand.

2. See it as two projects: Plan, then build.

You wouldn't give a contract to an architect to design and build an office building, let alone expect them to tell you how much it's all going to cost before design has begun. And yet for Web development, one Request For Proposal is often issued for entire Web projects, demanding a comprehensive price before any work has been started.

However, the problem goes beyond expecting Web developers to predict development costs before the project has been determined. More fundamentally, it is wrong to assume that the team which plans the site is the best team to build the site. If you go to a contractor who specializes in wood buildings, you're going to end up with a wood building: even if your organization would have been better off with something concrete!

So, see your Web site as two projects: the first project runs from strategy through the development of the information architecture. The second project comprises the graphic design, programming and maintenance.

3. Evergreen.

No matter how perfect your Web site design is, without an intelligent approach to site maintenance it will spin towards chaos over time. You have two choices: plan to rebuild the site from scratch starting in a year or so... or put a mechanism in place that guarantees that every part of the site remains fresh, accurate, and relevant.

The best mechanism I know of is to insist, starting with the content outline for the site, that every section has an evergreening plan. This means that nothing goes on the site unless it is accompanied by a commitment, written into someone's job description as a key results area, describing how often they will check that portion of the Web site to make sure it is still relevant, accurate and current.

This is often as simple as looking over the section and saying "Yes, it's still so!", then

updating the Reviewed Date. *[We tend to indicate that pages are "Last Updated", but users are usually more interested in how recently the content was certified as being true].*

By linking each section to someone's job description, we can have a site that maintains itself. And if a particular section is not important enough to deserve this level of commitment, it does not deserve to go on the site in the first place.

4. Write down an information design plan.

We love to start with graphic design. It's fun. It's familiar. We're visual animals, and we'd rather be choosing colours than rigorously taking inventory of content.

Unfortunately, starting with graphic design often results in an endless parade of design sketches being marched out, only to be trounced by someone asking "shouldn't we include a whatzit on every page?" Therefore, before graphic design begins we should be equipped with an agreed-upon description of what's in, what's out and how all the pages will link together.

Most people know they need a navigation plan (a blueprint of the information architecture). I urge you to go further, writing a text description of each element that will appear on the splash page, the home page, a typical site page, as well as the persistent navigation that appears throughout the site. Reaching agreement on such a document beforehand allows the graphic design process to focus on using the power of visuals to communicate effectively.

5. Communicate consistently.

We like to think of ourselves as creatures who process each piece of information that arrives based on logic and relevance. Instead, in fact it is our nature to retain and more easily trust those statements we have simply been exposed to most often.

This tendency to trust things we've seen often is why advertising, whether for provincial elections or global cola supremacy is, for the most part, about repeating a name over and over and over...and as consistently as possible.

We humans love the familiar, so learn a lesson from the branding experts: repeat your message incessantly, and present it in a visually consistent fashion. The more often your audience gets the same message, the more comfortable and authoritative it becomes.

6. Sign off every step.

The faster you're running, the more tempting it is to skip steps... and the more important it is not to, because you're more likely to stumble.

Web projects are complex: you need to complete all the steps, and in the correct order (using a model specifically designed for the Web).

If a project truly has to be completed in seven weeks, then there clearly will be no time to try again should you choose the wrong

steps for the first six weeks. And if you realize now that you can't possibly complete that project in seven weeks without skipping steps, then perhaps the answer is to decide now, rather than during the sixth week, that it can't be done.

If you realize that you don't have enough time to get to the airport in time to catch your flight, do you head to the airport anyhow? Of course not. And yet that is exactly what people often do with Web projects... rather than thinking about taking the train, the bus, a later flight, maybe not going at all, resources are wasted rushing towards an impossible deadline. Instead, take the time to invent another approach that will get the required results.

In a Web site, technology is rarely the problem, nor the solution. The solution lies in patient, mature process and consensus.

So sign off every step. You don't really have approval until someone is willing to sign their name to it... and complete approval is what you need before moving on.

7. Test. Test. Test.

The step I find most often skipped in Web projects is audience testing. Web sites are complex software applications, and to go to market with software before testing it on your audience is unlikely to succeed in a free market economy.

I am not urging more focus testing. It's about usability testing: one typical user in front of your Web site, trying to fulfill a test task that you have set for them. For a truly humbling experience, watch carefully as users try to use your product for the first time: you'll discover the gap between a good project and a great product.

Test often and test early. You don't have to wait until programming is complete: usability testing can be as simple as holding up sketches of pages and asking what they think will happen if they click here... or even having them examine a hyperlinked navigation plan and ask what they would click first in order to find an answer to a question.

Great Web site projects require a continuous improvement approach towards usability. While this takes a greater investment of time and money at the outset, it is also likely to generate desired results more quickly, while saving resources in the long term. Recognize this and you'll be the person that people will flock to when they need a Web presence that delivers on its promise.

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