

# SEVEN HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE WEBSITES

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*Websites are uncommonly complex projects, requiring “uncommon sense”. In my travels, I have helped with hundreds of websites, and have often wondered why most web projects fail to deliver on their promise. I discovered that no matter whether an organisation has one person or 10,000, websites that succeed tend to have certain qualities. If you adopt the following habits, you are far more likely to get the web results you deserve.*

## 1. Start with a strategic plan.

No matter how much effort, money, and technology we invest in a website, if we have not agreed on what we are trying to achieve, the likelihood of gaining valuable business results is small.

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

Everyone on the project team should be able to answer the question “How will we all 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 would not give a contract to an architect to design and build an office building, let alone expect the architect to tell you how much it is 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 website, is the best team to build the site. If you go to a contractor who specializes in wood buildings, you are going to end up with a wood building, even if your organisation would have been better off with something made of concrete!

So, see your Website 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: fresh, accurate, relevant.

No matter how perfect your Website 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 section of the site always remains fresh, accurate, and relevant.

You would not build a building without a budget for cleaning and cooling it. So why build a website without a plan to maintain it? 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 section of the website to make sure it is still fresh, accurate, and relevant.

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 putting this responsibility for each section into someone’s job description, we can have a site that maintains itself. If a particular section is not important enough to deserve this level of commitment, it does not deserve to be part of the site in the first place.

#### 4. Plan twice, design once.

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

However, would you ask a writer to draft three complete versions then throw out two? 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 such-and-such 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 that 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 in the past.

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

We humans love the familiar, so learn a lesson from the branding experts: build trust by repeating 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 are 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. In addition, if you realise that you cannot 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 cannot be done in the allocated time.

If you realise that you do not 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, or 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.



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In a website, technology is rarely the problem, nor the solution. The solution lies in a patient, mature process, which builds buy-in and consensus at every step.

So, get written approval before moving to the next step. You do not really have approval until the designated person is willing to sign his or her name to it... and complete approval is what you need before moving on.

#### 7. Test early and test often.

The step I find most often skipped in Web projects is audience testing. Websites 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. I am seeking more usability testing and more accessibility testing. Usability testing is about one typical user in front of your website, 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 will quickly discover the gap between a good product and a great product. Accessibility testing is about making sure that the site works for everyone, everywhere, anytime.

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

#### About David Berman:

**Berman** is an Ottawa-based senior communications consultant to some of Canada's largest Web presences. He is a Fellow of the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada and currently their ethics chair. He is an expert speaker who has worked in over a dozen countries in the last few years.

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