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PLANNING A SUCCESSFUL WEB SITE

A White Paper by Seven Design Avenue

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If you are considering having a web site developed for your company, building a successful web site is more than just throwing together a few web pages and submitting to a few search engines. A carefully thought-out, well-planned web site design, promotion and marketing strategy will ensure the success of your web site.

Many people are still under the mistaken assumption that just throwing together a few web pages and getting online will bring them overnight success. We hate to burst that bubble. Again, it takes a well thought-out **plan, design and promotion** strategy to make a successful website.

This white paper offers suggestions for web sites small, medium or large, from 5 to 5,000 pages, to help you identify the components of a successful website and speed the web site development process.

It will help you focus in-depth on the needs and the scope of your upcoming web project. You will be presented with a series of questions and suggestions covering everything from scope and features to budget, schedule and project goals.

The following are things to consider when planning a successful website:

Your Company Information

- Company Name
- Address
- City, State, Zip
- Phone
- Fax
- Email

- What is your USP (unique selling proposition)? Customers tend to look for information as a priority over shopping on-line. They may surf at other sites, but they will continually return to the sites they trust intuitively and can solve their problems. A visitor may need to return many times before making a purchase (studies suggest as many as 5 times).
- Set a time frame or target date for the completion of your web site design or re-design project.
- Are there any external factors driving your web site launch date? (Product launches, industry shows, etc.)
- Think of reasons why your business clearly beats the competition.
- Think of ways to encourage visitors to your web site to purchase or use your services now and abandon the need to continue their search.
- How does your business, products and services benefit your target audience? Specifically state a clear list of benefits.

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- What can your business offer your visitors, what's in it for them, how can you help them?
- What problems do your prospects have that your business solves?

Web Site Goals

- Develop a vision for the web site.
- How will visitors interact with your web site?
- What are the specific short-term goals for the website (in the first year reduce customer service workload, generate more sales)?
- What is your current level of on-line business and what are the expectations for future on-line sales?
- List specific long-term goals for the website (in the first 1 to 3 years).
- Do you have a physical location? How do you see the website and physical business working together?
- How would you define your web design project:
 - Marketing communications site
 - Online venture
 - Web based game or entertainment site
 - Community site
 - Web based application (tool or utility)
 - Portal site
 - Content based publishing site
 - Sales/e-commerce site
 - Re-design of a current site
 - Adding features to a current site
 - Other

Purpose of the Web Site

- Consider the major purposes for the website (establish an Internet presence, provide information, sell products online (e-commerce), provide customer service, etc.)
- What are the needs your business satisfies for your customers? What words or images will impart those needs? It is important to paint a mental picture for customers using words, colors and images. What analogies can be used to explain offers in simple, understandable terms?

Examples of Web Site Purpose:

<p>To offer company information and give the public a favorable impression of us</p> <p>To increase public awareness of our company's name, brand or identity</p> <p>To strengthen our position in the marketplace</p> <p>To strengthen brand identification</p> <p>To develop a list of qualified prospects</p> <p>To gain an increase in sales</p> <p>To sell products directly over the Internet taking credit cards and checks</p> <p>To make product or service information available to current customers</p> <p>To make product or service information available to distributors</p> <p>To serve the needs of current and future clients</p> <p>To explain our products and services</p> <p>To encourage potential customers to contact us by phone, mail or e-mail to consummate a sale</p> <p>To bring in new clients or customers to our location</p> <p>To compete in the global marketplace</p> <p>To offer links to other relevant sites</p> <p>To simply establish an Internet presence</p> <p>To provide information and customer service</p> <p>To sell products online</p>

Design and Layout

- In order for your site to appeal to your primary audience, what style or “voice” will you use (conservative, hip and trendy, etc.)?
- Approximately how many pages do you need created in the website?
- List a series of website URLs with designs or schemes that appeal to you and give reasons why.
- Which of Seven Design Avenue’s portfolio of sites is most appealing?
- List any particular fonts to be used. It is unwise to use more than 2-3 major fonts.
- List some of competitor website URLs:
- Choose a primary color scheme for the background, text and graphics (we recommend a white background with black text and 2 or 3 colors for highlights for most sites). This is the easiest to build, maintain and read. Be mindful of visitors with poor eyesight or color blindness when choosing text, background colors and graphics. Many of the most successful sites follow a simple color scheme.
- List some adjectives that describe the look and feel of the site experience that you want to create.
- Will the web site reinforce an existing branding or marketing strategy? How?
- What type of dynamic elements would you like to have on your site? (e.g. Flash animation, JavaScript rollovers, etc.)

E-Commerce Web Sites

- What type of e-commerce solution do you require?

Examples of e-commerce solutions:

- Flat file page, non-interactive. Visitors must print and fax order or phone order in.
- Single page secure order form that sends each order as an e-mail.
- Multi-page secure order form with shopping cart, visitors can pick products while continuing to look at the site, change their order, preview order and submit on-line. Order sent as e-mail or downloaded via FTP from the server.
- Full e-commerce shopping cart with automated real time credit card processing, integrated with backend database.

- List all credit cards the site will accept (Visa, MasterCard, AMEX, Discover). Merchant accounts should allow for taking on-line orders from the Internet. Please check with your bank as violation of these policies can result in termination of your merchant account. Policies differ from bank to bank. List all of methods of payment options (money order, check, internet check, various credit cards, etc.).
- How will sales tax be calculated for on-line orders? Will you need to know the tax rate for multiple states?
- Are wholesale prices, drop shipping arrangements or other standard agreements put into a dealer section? Will you allow others to offer your products or services directly on their sites?
- How will on-line and off-line orders be managed if your site is an e-commerce site? Are the ordering systems able to generate unique distinguishable order numbers? Do you require an all web-based order system that integrates both on-line and off-line orders?
- What are your delivery policies? Customers will probably buy if there is immediate delivery. How long does it take for an order to be received? A customer will not buy from a site if it does not show a complete cost breakdown of their order (price, tax, shipping, etc.) on-line.
- List any special shipping and handling charges or constraints on international orders. How will shipping and handling charges be automatically calculated for on-line domestic and international orders? Will international order shipping charges be calculated manually? List information such as harmonized codes, taxes, duty, etc. which can help expedite orders and reduce international costs. Shipping products internationally can be complex and costly. Will a consolidator or international tracking system be helpful?
- It is very important to have a plan to control on-line fraud. Too many charged back fraudulent orders might result in termination of your company's merchant account. The possibility of blacklisting by other merchant account providers can be a serious problem.

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Use manual AVS authorization and accept no unmatched orders (even if there is an approval code). Call to authorize international orders, ship only to billing address listed on credit card, double check on large orders with overnight shipping, refuse on-line orders from customers with free email domains.

- Will low price lead in products be followed with sales on the back end for higher priced products and services? Products up to \$20.00 meet little resistance while products in the hundreds or thousands of dollars may require a longer sales process. Complex services might only be closed using real salespeople. Is a plan in place to secure and qualify leads? How can you remove as much risk from the buyer as possible (warranty, return policy, etc.)? What is your sales cycle? Can you close sales on-line without human interaction or do you need to follow-up on leads generated?

Web Site Content

- **Content is King on the Internet.** No one knows your business as well as you do. Do not leave it up to another person outside of your business to develop your website content.
- Content prompts your visitors to visit your site over and over again. It helps to build a relationship with your visitors. Good content in a website is the difference between an Internet "brochure" with just your company name and telephone number and a list of items you sell or services you provide, or a website that people will want to visit and re-visit over and over again.
- If your company has already developed marketing materials such as a comprehensive brochure or sales literature package, the process of assembling your content could go rather quickly. If, however, your company has not yet compiled this type of information, you should invest some effort in this process to get the best results from your website.
- If you currently have printed materials, we suggest starting there to develop your content. You will want to begin integrating your marketing message in your website content so that your printed materials and web-based materials work well together to present a consistent image for your business.
- Will content and images come from you or do you need content creation?
- Will content be new, rewritten or both?
- How often will you add new content?
- What areas of the web site will have the most content updating?
- Who will update the content? If you will update content in-house, what is your ideal maintenance strategy (e.g. have staff make HTML changes, have administrative templates to automate content changes, etc.)?

Examples of Content:

Photos (prints, slides, negatives)
Text
Brochures
Business cards
Flyers
Product shots
Product samples
Press releases
Price and part lists
Frequently Asked Questions
Shipping and handling charges and constraints
Warranty policy
Privacy policy
Return policy
Guarantees
True and believable testimonials
Endorsements from known sources
Credits
Bios
History
Education
Certifications
Awards
Case studies
Photos of yourself, staff and location
Transcripts of interviews
Industry recognition
Map and directions to your physical location

- What are all the different ways visitors can contact you?
Name
Address
Phone
Fax
1-800
E-mail addresses
International and other local/national offices
- List hours of operation, time zone (PST, EST) and days closed.
- Are you a local, regional, national or international business? What areas do you want to specifically target?
- Do you have a business slogan or catch phrase?
- List features of your products and/or services? Please specify a clear list of items.

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- List 6 to 8 major topics for your site (i.e. Products, Services, Information, How to Contact us, Galleries, etc.). Base these topics on the visitor's view of the division of information on your site. Major topics will be broken into sub topics (i.e. Information may be broken down into Links, Frequently Asked Questions, Tips, etc). From the tree below, mark major sub-topics of interest. This sample tree can be reorganized as needed. Add topics relevant to your site as needed. Too many choices are confusing. Trying to scan major portal pages and choose from 100 links is time consuming and confusing. 7 or 8 links is the maximum amount a visitor should confront. A site with hundreds of pages can easily be created using 7 or 8 general topics. Adding a few additional general topics (e.g., "Information" or "Products" will allow room for expansion under those headings.

Examples of Web Site Sections/Pages:

Welcome message
 Mission statement
 Company overview
 Who we are
 What we do
 About the Company
 What's new
 Product information, pricing and availability
 Technical specification of products (if any)
 Warranty information
 Office/store hours
 Services
 Frequently asked questions
 Newsletter
 Response form for information
 Survey of customer preferences
 Order form
 Links to e-mails
 Specials
 Sweepstakes
 Contests
 Map to store/office
 History/Philosophy of business
 Client recommendations/referrals
 Tours
 Catalog requests
 Demonstrations
 Free offers
 Unique information related to your products or services
 Trivia
 User section: A section for consumers
 Client section: A section for current clients
 Staff
 Splash pages
 Home

Products and/or Services

Menus
 Catalogs (static or Rich Media)
 Prices
 Testimonials
 Purchasing / Shopping Cart
 Downloadable products
 Product overview / specifications / demos
 Product features & benefits
 Warranty & Return Policy
 Licensing
 Customer Service
 Training
 Contracting & Consulting
 Stock List
 Capabilities
 Portfolio
 Parts List
 Dealer List
 Assembly Instructions
 Schematics
 Classified Ads
 Credits
 Samples / Tear sheets
 Resume
 Bookstore
 Competitive Matrix
 Contact Us
 Jobs
 Overview
 Job Postings
 Recruiting
 Resume submissions
 Benefits
 Customer Login
 Database searching

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Information

Links
About Us
Reviews
Credits
Copyrights
Privacy Policy
Our Team
Case Studies
Awards
News and Events
Newsletter
Press Releases
Media Coverage
Frequently Asked Questions
Alliance Partners
Legal Notices
About our Industry
Glossary of Terms
Regional Information
Tech Notes

Tips and tricks

Interesting Facts
Articles
Who's Who
Site Map
Help
Site Quick Guide
Galleries
Intranet
Human resources
Document storage
Internal news
Finance
Project Tracking
Website reports
Free Stuff
Downloadable screensavers/utilities
Computer Wallpaper
Contests

- Choose types of components to include other than still photos and text (e-commerce, affiliate programs, virtual reality images, java applets, backend database integration, survey forms, feedback forms, opt-in newsletter management, referral forms, etc.).
- Include unique content on your site. Partner with a content provider to update content. Since most surfers are seeking information, the best sites are those that become hubs or portals. A site that contains large amounts of information (not readily available elsewhere) directly related to the product or service being sold may be far more successful than one that only offers a product or service. It has been proven time and time again that the amount of traffic, links into your site, return visits and referrals are directly proportional to the amount of unique and useful content available to your customers at the site not, the amount of money spent on off-line and on-line advertising. Are you able to write articles on subjects related to your visitor's interests or can you offer to publish other works in exchange for exposure? Some companies offer content that can be leased as well. Can you provide on-line assembly instructions, how-to guides, tips and tricks information pages, etc.? This is one of the most important aspects of creating a successful site. When coupled with a quality design and competitive products and services and outstanding customer service the site becomes a winner.
- What can be done to add value to products and services? If your prices cannot be competitive, what other methods will showcase your products/services? The addition of free bonuses, lifetime warranties, free shipping and handling, upgrades, etc. will often be perceived by the consumer as value-added especially if a dollar value can be attached to these extras.
- Will you use a survey form to gather information from your visitors? What questions would be included on this survey? Will you offer an incentive to customers for taking part

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in this survey? Surveys can also be used as exit strategies to gather useful information as visitors leave the site. A cookie can be used to eliminate seeing the form for repeat visitors.

Web Site Functionality

- What functional requirements do you believe to be necessary? (e.g. downloadable items, database driven web pages, personalization, e-commerce, catalog, Flash animation, video/audio, etc)
- Who will update these functionalities?
- Are there extraordinary security issues?
- Are there other technical issues or limitations?
- How will the site be served/hosted?

Web Site Budget

- Purchasing a web site is somewhat similar to purchasing a car. You can buy a car for \$10,000 or \$35,000 - the difference in price is one of performance and options. We ask for a budget estimate simply to find out what type of web site you are requesting based on the level of functionality. A 5 page informational only web site can run a few hundred dollars, but a web site that is completely e-commerce enabled, with real-time credit card processing, a shopping cart, and a separate technical specs database system could be a few thousand dollars and there are still many variations in between.
- What is your estimated budget for your web design project?
- What is your budget for yearly maintenance of the web site?
- What is your budget for marketing the website and how do you intend to market both on and off the Internet? You should conservatively plan for at least half of your budget to be for marketing. Simply putting up a website and submitting to search engines is not marketing. It is only one small tactic in an overall campaign.

Domain Name

- If you have not done so yet, you need to determine a tentative name for your website. You may want to use your existing business name. But your website focus may be broader or narrower than your organization name implies. In that case, look for a name that is descriptive, unique, short and memorable.
- Also give thought to your domain name. You may be able to select a domain name which is related to your site name, if the best names are not already taken.

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- If your domain name is registered, it is important that you keep a record of (1) the domain name registrant and (2) your username and password you used when you registered the domain name. This is important in order for your hosting account to be set up
- It is always a good idea to have your own domain name instead of using just a "sub" name to someone else's domain. Search engines are more favorable to indexing your site and your name becomes easier to remember to your clients. Keyword-rich domain names are also favorable to search engines.
- Is your domain name registered?
- If you **do not** already have a domain name, choose 5 names. Your choices may already be taken. Consider registering a few general and specific variations including .net and .org domains. Your domain name should be easily identifiable, easy to explain over the phone and print on a business card. Most short names are usually taken; long names can be good if they click in someone's mind. Try out your ideas on several people. Then ask them in a few days if they remember how to spell it. Try out the name on the phone to see if it is easily remembered and spelled by others. Resorting to lengthy explanations or spelling means problems. How long (in years) will your domain be registered?

Web Site Hosting

- Do you need web site hosting?
- What level of hosting will be required (this may need to be determined during the design phase)?
- Can you use a low-cost service may be appropriate for smaller, informational sites.
- Do you need a higher end outsourced service? A higher end service may be appropriate if you have an e-commerce website with or if your web site has databases or other special web applications.
- Will you be hosting and managing your own web servers (this would typically be for large companies as the costs can be very high).
- List any requirements for the host platform and cross compatibility (NT or Unix)? List requirements to support types of web pages. For example, static web pages, Active Server Pages, Cold Fusion pages, dynamically generated CGI pages?
- Is interfacing with other systems (both on-line and off-line) important? Describe any systems you will require.
- When you establish a hosting account for your web site, keep a record of the hosting company's name, telephone number, website address and your username and

password.

Web Site Marketing and Promotion

- Do you use an advertising agency or brand design firm? If so, how involved will they be in the development or redesign of your website?
- How do you plan to promote your product and/or web site?
- Do you intend to drive traffic to your site from any of these traditional media methods?
 - Advertising: Print, radio, TV, outdoor signage campaigns
 - Direct Mail
 - In store promotions
 - Giveaways
 - Events
 - Word of mouth; feet on the street
 - Other
- If you currently have a website, how many visitors do you receive each month?
- Web surfers have short attention spans, may not remember your site and will probably not return unless you give them a compelling reason to do so. How can you encourage repeat visitors and referrals?
- Every measure should be taken to encourage visitors to voluntarily submit their email address. Free offers, contests, referral forms, surveys and requests for information forms can be useful tools to encourage email signups. What can you offer that can be digitally delivered on site (computer wallpaper, screensavers, special reports, on-line coupons, affiliate programs, etc.) and is free?
- List 30 words or phrases that describe your business. Pick words/phrases relevant to your business. List all keywords that would link search engines to your website. Phrases should be both specific and general.
- Write a 25 word description of your business to be displayed and used in search engine submissions. Describe what your business offers, to whom it is offered and a succinct reason your business should be considered.
- List audience demographics – who you want to reach and how this will be accomplished (age range, profession, interests, etc.)
- Is this a new market you are trying to create for your product/service or is there already an existing market? Selling in an existing market is easier and less risky. The understanding of what you are offering already exists since other companies have paved the way. What existing distribution channels are you able to tap? Are there any 800-pound gorillas and if so, how can you compete against them? Microsoft and Toy's R Us are considered to be gorillas in their markets.

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- Are there any search engines, directories or sites you would like to submit to besides the industry standard top 10 that are specific to your business or industry?

E-mail Accounts

- List e-mail addresses you want associated with your domain name

Web Site Maintenance

- How often during the year do you anticipate updates to the website and what types of information will be updated?
- Who will maintain the site? If another business will do site maintenance, will they have the skills and tools to support it? Will training be required?

Problems

- List any current problems experienced with your existing website (poor performance, graphics, load time, design, etc.)
- How can you ensure information downloaded from websites against hardware failure? Information gathered should reside in multiple places. Opt-in lists, affiliate data, order data, etc. from the website needs to be backed up periodically and stored off-site. Copy files to a disk or CD-ROM and put it in a safe deposit box. Will you need a backup system to ensure safety of downloaded information?

Mailing Lists and Opt-In Newsletters

- What type of opt-in mail list gathering will you use? Systems range from free services like ListBot to systems like CyberTrakker that create mail merge opt-in lists tied into e-commerce, referral, newsletter, opt-in and other forms. Do you have a program in place to manage in-house newsletters, bulk personalized e-mails and removal requests? Consider Subscribe Me Professional or custom forms for gathering information.

Affiliate Programs

- Will you join any affiliate programs and link those sites to your website? You can sign up on related sites programs and get a commission on sales made on your site. This works best when other sites are directly related to your website and affiliate links are worked

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into your site in context. Third party product endorsements work better than simple links to other sites.

- Will offer an affiliate program on your web site? Affiliate programs are useful for any or all of the following: allows 3rd parties to market your products and services for a commission, tracks effectiveness of individual advertisements and marketing campaigns, some allow customization to manage signup of individuals or companies with personalized self replicated web pages. Is the ability to track effectiveness of individual ads and marketing campaigns a requirement?

Web Site Security

- What security is required for the website – Is protection of sensitive files an issue (order data, backend database access, etc.)? Do back end computers access the Internet through permanent connections? Are personal computer hard drives password protected or behind a firewall?
- Will there be password protected areas for dealers, members and/or downloads? Will your site use any digital delivery systems to individually password protect each customers download?

Project Manager

- Who is the project manager for this project? Who will manage each aspect of the website once it is complete (i.e. e-mail management, system maintenance, new content, testing forms periodically, marketing, etc.)?
- List other contacts to interview regarding the design of the site. What positions of responsibility do they hold?

Miscellaneous

- Are there any special needs or components required that are not already covered?
- Define the criteria you will use to determine the website's success (i.e. Internet orders of a certain volume, website traffic of a certain volume (this should not be used as the sole definition of success), X amount of sales as a percentage of hits, decrease in customer service costs, increase in productivity). There should be a trackable method to determine success.
- Testing is typically done using the top web browsers
- List any existing websites you want linked in your site. These should be sites that are related to your site and not direct competitors. Sites should be those whose services you use or that provide service or information useful to your target audience. Sites that

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cross-link with each other may increase both businesses targeted traffic.

Delivery of Web Site Content

- It would be helpful for us to have samples of your current printed materials – brochures, letterheads, business cards, booklets, etc., so we can see how you present your company image.
- Your home page functions as your storefront and needs to be graphically balanced, pleasing and informative. You must set up a separate word processing or html file for textual content for each web page. Microsoft Word or Corel WordPerfect documents are acceptable. Please do not send “rough” drafts. Send us your final version.
- The quality and appearance of your site has a lot to do with the quality of photographs and graphics you choose for your web pages. Your homepage needs a graphic to look inviting. Think about it as the sign over your storefront that beckons your customer inside. Instead of graphic, you may also opt to use headline text. You may submit your graphics to us in either digitized form on a diskette, or via e-mail or hard copy photos which we will scan. Please prepare captions for each photo or graphic and also indicate to which web page each graphic belongs. Clipart tends to look a bit tacky on websites. We recommend photos. Photos you supply either by sending the photos themselves for us to scan them and return them to you or by sending the digitized images on a diskette. You may elect to purchase stock photos from www.photodisc.com, www.corbis.com, www.gettyworks.com or www.corel.com for inclusion in your web pages.