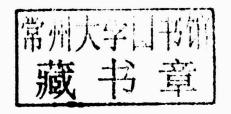


Tips and Tricks for Web Site Managers

Mark Kerr Editor







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Case Studies (in alphabetical order of organisation)

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Introduction

You need help. Whatever type of web site you manage, you need help. Sometimes you don't need very much help, and just a hint will do, but sometimes you need blue flashing lights and sirens and a full emergency team of assistants. This book is intended to sit somewhere between those two extremes. It might provide the occasional hint here and there or it might have the information you need to avoid a full-scale emergency.

It is not intended to be a full-blown HTML or web design manual, nor does it presume to replace the acquisition of experience and knowledge over time. I do hope that it will be useful as a source book of ideas and suggestions, both to improve and enhance the performance and appearance of a site, and to assist in the 'behind-the-scenes' management that most web sites require.

Thanks to the generosity of the contributors, this book includes two types of expert advice: case studies and tips and tricks.

The case studies provide an insight into the way in which several wellknown organisations have designed and developed their web sites. The organisations cover the spectrum from large to small, public to private sector, academic to commercial, and between them they deal with many of the key issues involved in designing, developing and maintaining a web site.

The tips and tricks are the essential nuggets of information that you pick up almost by accident at the water fountain, on a training course, at a conference, or simply chatting with colleagues. Any single tip might save you hours of effort, or help you avoid a critical error, and put together they provide you with the equivalent of several years of hard-won experience at the coalface of web development.

The book has been organised into six key sections, and the tips and tricks are located wherever they are most relevant. Most of the case studies, however, cover more than a single issue, so I have grouped them into

two sections the first loosely covering general design issues, the second (equally loosely) covering structural and management issues.

The supporting web site (http://www.webtipsandtricks. com) provides links to the sites used in case studies, as well as to the partners, tools and resources referred to throughout the book. This site will be maintained and expanded, and I welcome suggestions and additions to make the site as useful as possible to the web site management community.

Site Definition and Planning

Researching the marketing and publishing environment, assessing the competition and planning the web site design process – all these activities are essential if you are to give your web site project the greatest chance of success, at the least cost to you and your organisation.

Planning

Whether the aim is to develop a new web site or improve an existing service, it is increasingly clear that many sites do not always meet their targets. These targets may be revenue based or they may be more abstract, seeking to present the organisation as effectively and efficiently as possible to its audience.

The publicly available Web is developing at breathtaking speed. A recent report from Cyveillance (http://www.cyveillance.com) estimated that 7,000,000 new pages are added to the Web each day. The current total size of the public Web is over two billion documents. No matter what the content, purpose or location of your site, at some level you are competing with much of this information for the attention of your existing or anticipated audience. Developing an effective service to achieve your objectives requires a strategy; and an effective strategy requires a plan.

There are four basic stages through which the planner has to move to create an effective project plan:

- Awareness
- Familiarity
- Understanding
- Readiness.

Awareness

Although your site may be designed by other staff, or by an outside contractor, it is essential that you, as the site manager, understand the 'Research till you drop. When setting up a web site or e-business do as much research as you can to find out who is offering similar services on-line (and offline). Use search engines, company lists, newsgroups and word of mouth to get as much information on your competitors as you possibly can. And don't just limit your research to European companies – EVERYONE is a competitor on-line. Most importantly, don't stop researching once your e-company/dotcom is off the ground. Carry on researching and refining.'

Gillian Roach
Editor, Internet Works magazine

broad principles of site design so that the correct decisions can be made at the outset. Many of the readers of this book are not designers but managers, who will be hiring in the designers or managing the web team. Just understanding the jargon and the basic principles of web design can go a long way towards preventing misunderstandings by the designers about your requirements.

Familiarity

There are as many methods for designing web sites as there are designers, but use of a simple methodology, and available tools, can avoid confusion and a lack of clarity in the design, purpose and presentation of the site. A relentless pursuit of the cutting edge of design and development can mean that nobody is actually comfortable with the tools being used, and everybody is learning new possibilities all the time. At one level that can generate a highly creative environment and a stimulating atmosphere, but on the other hand there does need to be some stability if the web site is expected to perform reliably on a day-to-day basis.

Understanding

If you understand your requirements you will be better placed to communicate, monitor and implement them. Conversely, if you have only a limited grasp of the medium, how it will affect your organisation and how you intend to use it, then it will be difficult - even impossible - to communicate your needs clearly and accurately to the design and development team.

Building a Subject Information Gateway Team

'Subject information gateways are increasingly becoming a popular and an effective way to assemble and repackage information and make it accessible from one single point of entry. The gateway will indeed be a useful starting point to search the web both for novice and experienced users. The success of the gateway is highly dependent on the relevance of the content, and this is determined well before the gateway is built. One of the best ways to ensure the success of a gateway is to have an interdisciplinary web development team. The team should obviously include technical staff and subject experts who will act as content editors and providers. It should also consist of beneficiaries of the web resource itself, who may not necessarily be professionals but ordinary people.

Carrying out an information-needs assessment before building the gateway, during the building of the resource and after the gateway has been launched will ensure that it continues to be an effective information service. It might even be advisable to carry out on-line focus studies with the target audience."

Mike Chivhanga Web Development Consultant, Internet Studies Research Group, City University

Readiness

Like many processes, the design of a web site can be broken down into simple steps, and each step can then be further broken down in to tasks and actions. This book is based on the principle that most large projects can be reduced to 'bite-sized chunks', thus reducing the fear factor and avoiding the sense of being overwhelmed by the gargantuan nature of the task ahead. Creating an action plan, setting achievable targets within sensible deadlines, and distributing responsibility appropriately, will ensure that the project moves forwards as smoothly as possible.

The Five-Step Doodle

It's not strikingly original, but it's true nonetheless, to say that the best planning tools a web site manager has are a simple piece of paper and a pencil. The ability to sketch out a site structure, to visualise the relationship between different areas of content, to demonstrate information flow and to create understandable page layouts - all these require an initial doodle.

The doodle is vastly underrated as a professional tool, but one common design factor links every great web site - they probably all started as a bit of a doodle.

Sit down with a piece of paper, and create a few short lists:

- Identify outcomes
- Picture the potential areas of content
- Imagine the information a visitor to the web site might want or expect
- List the departments in your organisation that might want to be represented on your web site
- Identify the key elements on your **competitors**' web sites.

Outcomes

There are many potential site outcomes, but essentially they are divided between internal and external results. Internal outcomes might include satisfying your organisation's core mission, justifying a departmental budget or staffing level, or reducing costs in delivery of information and services. External outcomes might include providing new outlets for your products, information or services through customer acquisition and increased sales value, or raising awareness of your organisation in the wider marketing environment.

Content

The range of content expected and available from your web site is assessed more closely in Chapter 2, but it includes corporate and service information as well as customer support.

Visitor Expectations

If your site is supporting an existing service you will have a reasonably clear idea of what your users expect from you, and therefore - in theory at least - what they expect from your web site.

Departmental Expectations

Overlook internal expectations at your peril - the needs of your organisation cannot

Keep putting yourself in the user's position. They have no idea about what is in your site or how to get there. Give them some pointers. Think very hard about why people would want to come to your site and what they would like to get out of it.'

Liz Citron MD, Arehaus

always be described in terms of customer service. Other agendas, hidden or explicit, are an unavoidable part of an institutional web site. It may simply be a matter of reflecting internal structure and relationships, but making this compatible with an outward-looking site is no trivial matter.

Competitor Elements

Your web site may have a clear mission, relevant and sufficient content, be focused on customer service and reflect internal organisational needs, but there is one more element to consider - the competition. The transparent nature of the Web provides you with the opportunity to monitor those sites that are competing for your visitors' attention. Identify elements that enhance these sites, and consider developing alternatives for your own site. This does not mean simply copying, but it does mean ensuring that you do not lose competitive advantage due to simple ignorance of the competitive environment. Even unique sites have to compete for users' time and attention.

Each of these steps may result in a short list of one or two items, or a much more extensive one. When you've finished, stop and look at these five lists. Do they match each other? Probably not. It is very unlikely that what you (the company) have to say is the same as what they (the audience) want to see. The Web is a publishing and communication medium, and as such it needs to be focused on the audience. This will be a recurring theme throughout this book, but it is surprising how often this is overlooked, particularly in information-based sites.

Of course, it is not compulsory for your doodle to actually be a doodle – it could just as usefully be the outcome of a series of lengthy committee meetings, or the product of a consultancy project. You might need to use the full range of research tools, including focus groups, customer interviews and desk research. The important result is the comparison and reconciliation between producer and audience expectations in such a way that you achieve your intended aims.

Research

As with any strategic development, you should conduct some basic market research prior to the site development. This will help keep your planning process focused on the customer and demonstrate that you are aware of the wider environment in which your site exists. There are many research tools and services on the Web that can assist you with this process.

Who's on the Web?

Everyone and anyone seem to be using the Web as their primary source of external communication, from governments and large corporations to small corner shops, local charities and individuals. A simple analysis of the currently registered domains shows the distribution of domains by type.

Domain name registrations at 7 October 2000				
Type of domain name	Number registered			
All domains	30,656,015			
.com	18,563,619			
.net	3,441,823			
.org	2,172,710			
.edu	5,673			
.gov	730			
.uk (United Kingdom)	2,213,596			
.de (Germany)	2,032,197			
.au (Australia)	151,148			
.it (Italy)	341,005			
.ar (Argentine)	353,548			
.nl (Netherlands)	443,272			
.br (Brazil)	312,115			

Source: DomainStats (http://www.domainstats.com)

The UK figures of	can be broken	down further	using	Nominet's statistics.
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UK domain name statistics at 31 August 2000				
Type of domain name	Number registered			
.co.uk	1,980,135			
org.uk	126,225			
ltd.uk	7887			
plc.uk	1328			
net.uk	489			
sch.uk	20,828			
Total	2,137,199			

Source: Nominet (http://www.nominet.org.uk)

For organisations creating a new brand, or launching themselves on to the Web for the first time, the selection of an effective domain name can be a difficult process. All the 'good' names seem to have gone, and the organisation's preferred domain name might have been taken by someone with no apparent claim to that name. Trademark and copyright issues aside, choosing a domain name is often simpler than many organisations think: the most important aspects are that it should be memorable, and easy to spell and type. Issues relating to brand reinforcement and literal, descriptive names are secondary, and can be dealt with by effective marketing and explanatory text on the site or promotional literature. The name should be linguistically simple, meaning that when you tell someone your domain name over the telephone you should not have to spell it out carefully, explaining hyphens or underscores. Simplicity is all. Avoid punctuation and clever spelling tricks – in4mation for **information** or content4u for **contentforyou** – may look very clever, but you will have to explain them carefully every single time. And just because you can now have a domain name that's up to 63 characters long, it doesn't mean that it's a good idea!

If you are determined to register your domain in several overseas territories, a search on NetNames (http://www.netnames.co.uk) produces a table of all the national domains, showing whether a particular name is available or in use. At the very least you should check to see if 'your' domain is being registered by companies who could confuse your visitors as to their identity and purpose, whether by accident or by design. Users who guess a URL rather than doing a search could find