10 Questions to Ask Before Setting Up a Web Site

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- how to make your Web site more effective,
- how to rank higher at the search engines,
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Thanks,

Rich Brooks
President, flyte new media

Do I need a Web site?

If you're reading this, the answer is probably yes. In years past it may have been acceptable to forego a Web site for your business or association, but those days are gone.

These days prospects and customers *expect* you to have a Web site. They *expect* to be able to learn about you, your services, your products, and get directions to your office or store any time, day or night. They *expect* to be able to make purchases from you in their pajamas and have their products delivered the next day. They *expect* to be able to complete an application online and get instant access to your Members Only area.

Like the fax machine and telephone before it, a Web site has become a requirement for business legitimacy. Businesses, associations, and professionals risk looking amateurish or even disreputable if they don't have a Web site…even if it's just an online brochure. People will wonder about the prospects of a company that doesn't have a Web site.

What's the first thing *you* do when you want to learn more about a company? That's right, you visit their Web site.

Not having a Web site will cost you business. If your prospect jumps on Google or Yahoo searching for a product or service you provide, your competition *with* a Web site is going to get that business. Search engines can deliver this business to you…but only if you have a Web site they can link to.

What are my business goals?

To build a Web site that builds your business, you'll first need to clarify what your business goals are.

Your goal shouldn't be to create a beautiful, elegant Web site full of bells-and-whistles…although that's a nice outcome. Your goal is to improve your business. Your site needs to serve your business needs, and for that to happen you need to be clear on what you want to achieve.

If you've never sat down to outline your business goals, you're overdue. It's impossible to succeed if you haven't defined what success means to you.

If you're a business, are you trying to sell more products? Go after bigger clients? Introduce a new product line? You'll also want to consider who your competition is. Is it other companies, different services, or a misperception in the marketplace?

If you're an association, are you trying to create grass-roots support for a cause? Grow your membership? Build a community? Offer new services to members? Collect dues and donations electronically?

If you're a professional or small group practice, are you trying to get more clients or patients? Branch into new areas? Establish yourself as an expert in your field?

Once you've uncovered and clarified your business goals, you can create a Web site to support them.

How can a Web site help me reach my business goals?

Depending on your goals, this answer could vary greatly. You'll be looking to find the appropriate tools that match up with your goals. Although there are an unlimited number of solutions to reach every goal, here are a few examples to get you started.

If you're looking to get more speaking engagements, sell more books, or get onto radio or television, you'll want to establish yourself as an expert. On your Web

site you'll want to have articles, tips and F.A.Q.'s (frequently asked questions) that show off your area of expertise. The narrower your focus, the more likely you are to be found by people searching for experts in your field. You should also consider adding a free email newsletter to your Web site and publish a new article in it monthly.

If you're looking to increase your association's membership base or offer more benefits to current members, you can offer additional services online. You can include a password-protected Members Only area to your Web site with articles and resources not available elsewhere. Your online store can offer discounts to members. You can offer membership applications online. By taking online payments and processing the orders in real time, you can give instant access to the Members Only area, taking advantage of your visitors' natural desire for instant gratification.

Additional online tools like discussion forums, chat rooms, and an email newsletter can help build community and support for grass-roots activities. Also consider taking online donations through a shopping cart or PayPal solution.

If you're looking to sell more products or bring a new product to market, you can add e-commerce to your site. There are several ways to add e-commerce to your site. If you don't have a Merchant Account already, you may want to start by just dipping your toe into the e-commerce ocean with PayPal. By choosing PayPal you can take Visa, MasterCard, American Express or Discover payments securely online without having to pay any monthly or startup fees…just 2.9% plus $.30 per transaction. You can include Buy Now buttons or a rudimentary shopping cart to your site as well.

If you're looking to start with a more robust shopping cart solution, 3rd party products like Miva Merchant or custom-developed solutions may be in order. You'll probably need your own Internet Merchant Account (which has setup and monthly fees), and if you want to process orders in real time you'll need an Internet Gateway such as Verisign or Authorize.net (which also has setup and monthly fees). In addition you'll probably need a secure server and a Security Certificate. Sometimes these are included with your hosting plan, other times they're extra.

Who is my audience and what are they looking for?

One of the biggest mistakes companies make is trying to be all things to all people. People naturally gravitate towards specialists, not generalists. Your Web site should focus on your target audience and their most pressing problems.

Determine who your best prospects are and what their needs are. Are they single adults or parents? Men or women? Businesses or consumers? Why are they coming to your Web site? What are their problems, needs or desires?

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A common mistake companies make on their Web site (and other marketing material) is putting the focus on themselves and not the concerns of their customers. Don't take this the wrong way, but your prospects don't care about you, how long you've been in business, or your mission statement. Not at first, at least.

As it's been said, everyone's favorite radio station is WII-FM. (What's In It For Me?)

The first thing your home page should do is address the problems and concerns of your prospects. You only have a few seconds to grab their attention and try and convert them into customers. Your opening statement should be written to get people to take action.

After you've convinced your prospects that you understand their pain, then you can start talking about your products or services…or more specifically, the benefits they provide. (Remember, people buy benefits, not features.)

How much should I budget for my site?

Even though Web design firms have been around for ten years (or more) now, there's still a wide range in price…and in the value you'll receive.

This is due in part to the fact that Web sites can be created by big ad agencies, boutique design firms, college students looking for beer money, and even small business owners using free or nearly-free software available on the Web.

Consider that the price of a home can range from tens of thousands of dollars for a starter home in some areas to ten of millions of dollars for a mansion somewhere else. In other words, there's a wide range in pricing because there's a wide range in the quality and sophistication of Web sites.

The price of your Web site will vary depending on:

- the size or number of pages,
- the complexity of the site and the amount of interactivity, such as database-driven pages, e-commerce, or discussion forums,
- the talent and experience of the company designing your site.

As with most things in life, you get what you pay for.

Keep in mind that your Web site, if built correctly, is an investment, not an expense. Many companies find they save money by providing information on their Web site that previously had tied up their receptionists or call centers. Other

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companies save thousands of dollars a year in printing and mailing costs by going "virtual;" sending out their newsletters and reports through email or downloads. Many companies increase the business they're doing by opening their doors 24/7 through an e-commerce solution.

The important thing to keep in mind is that the expenses for a Web site don't end at launch. Some people refer to the law of thirds:

- **one third goes to the launch of the site** (design, development, copywriting, etc.)
- **one third goes to marketing** (Search Engine Optimization, email marketing, blogs, etc.)
- **and one third is earmarked for updates and maintenance** (changes to your site, updating information, hosting costs, etc.)

Every Web site will differ in terms of cost and needs, but the law of thirds is a good marker to go by. If you consider that the average life of a Web site is three years (before a major revamp is due) you can figure to spend about as much on both marketing and updates as you did on developing your site.

It's important to have money left in your Web budget after your site launches. No Hollywood studio would consider spending tens of millions of dollars creating a film and then not support it with millions more in advertising. And most movies are only around for a few weeks! Your Web site needs to last a lot longer, and frequent updates and marketing will help you achieve this goal.

Who's going to write the content?

The single most overlooked component of most Web sites is the content. Unfortunately, it shows.

Many small business owners or association presidents say, "I can write the copy. I know this material better than anyone." Or, they "delegate" it to someone else in the office who also has no experience writing copy. What people don't realize is that copywriting is a very particular skill that takes training.

Most people can doodle a smiley face or get through a game of Pictionary, but they don't consider themselves artists. Most people will happily sing in the shower or in their car with the windows rolled up, but they don't consider themselves singers. Just because you can string words into a sentence does not mean you're a copywriter.

Poor copy might be the most expensive mistake a Web site owner can make. There is a *big* difference between writing a report, or a manual, or even a book and

writing copy. Writing a book is challenging, but it exercises a different part of your brain.

Writing copy is about using the right words to get a reader to take action. Copywriters are trained to know what combination of words is likely to get your site visitors to click on a link, pick up the phone, sign up for an email newsletter, or buy your product.

If your budget doesn't allow for a copywriter, consider hiring someone to copyedit your pages. If your budget doesn't allow for that, consider hiring someone to copyedit some of the most important pages on your site, such as the home page, and pages about your products and services.

If that's still out of reach, or if you have your heart set on writing your own copy, I recommend reading the article "Limited Web Budget? Focus on Content," by Grace A. Stoekle at MarketingProfs.com as a primer, and picking up Nick Usborne's *Net Words: Creating High-Impact Online Copy* and *Persuasive Online Copywriting: How to Take Your Words to the Bank*, by Bryan Eisenberg, Jeffrey Eisenberg and Lisa T. Davis.

How will my site be kept up-to-date?

Launching your site signifies the beginning of your Web site, not the end.

Every successful Web site requires ongoing updates and changes to keep the site fresh and relevant to its audience. Even if your Web site isn't the kind that will require visitors to return time and again, stale content—such as Coming Soon events that have long past and Valentine Day Specials that appear in June—will convince visitors that your Web site isn't relevant and there's no one minding the store.

Updates can be done in house, if a staff member is familiar with HTML, or by an outside vendor, such as the firm that developed your site, or by another party.

If you want to handle updates in house but don't have anyone on staff who does know HTML, there's still hope. *Before* the site is developed request that a staff member be able to make changes to the site using only a Web browser.

The cost of updating your Web site through a browser will be determined by how much change you want to be able to make and how these changes are handled. The ability to update of one or two pages on your Web site may only add a couple hundred dollars to your cost; being able to create new pages, have them linked from the home page automatically, and be posted and taken down on certain dates, will require a more robust Content Management System (CMS) and will cost a few thousand to tens of thousands of dollars.

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A third option is to look into a program like Contribute. This is a sister program to Dreamweaver, a popular professional-level HTML editor. It's a little tougher to master than Microsoft Word, but the learning curve isn't too steep.

One consideration many people forget to make is that a professional design and development firm will be able to update information and integrate it with the rest of the site. Many Web sites start off looking professional, but deteriorate over time as multiple users add content in different colors, fonts and styles.

How do I drive more traffic to my site?

Although a Web site may serve as marketing for the rest of your business or organization, it also requires marketing—both traditional and online—to attract visitors.

Using traditional methods you should include your Web site address—your URL—on your business card, letterhead, and any printed marketing material. If you do print, radio or TV ads, make sure your URL appears there as well.

Web marketing can be divided into four categories.

Search Engine Marketing: Also called Search Engine Optimization, or SEO. With 80% of Web surfers using search engines to find new Web sites, it's important to develop a search engine friendly Web site.

This means creating focused content that answers the questions (or searches) that your prospects are raising. It means getting incoming links from other, relevant Web sites or blogs. It means regularly updating your site with new content.

For more information on SEO and ongoing updates, visit
http://flyte.blogs.com/search_engine_marketing/

Email Marketing Campaigns: It's one thing to get people to visit your Web site once, it's another matter entirely to get them to visit time and again.

One way to encourage repeat visits, or to connect with customers even when they're not at your Web site, is with an email newsletter. Whether it's an article, tips and advice, or announcements of new products and services, you can deliver an email newsletter that looks like one of your Web pages right to your subscribers email box on a regular basis.

By adding a subscription box on your Web site and a compelling reason to join, you will have another tool to market your product or service.

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To encourage visitors to subscribe, try "sweetening the deal" by offering a free white paper or report when they subscribe, or by entering all subscribers into a giveaway of some sort. Also, consider turning that on its head: Download Our Free Report *and* Receive a Copy of our Free Email Newsletter.

For more information on Email Marketing and ongoing updates, visit
http://flyte.blogs.com/email_marketing/

Blogs: The new kid on the Web marketing block, blogs are coming on strong.

Originally the tool of hobbyists, cranks and political junkies, blogs have become indispensable tools for businesses to market their services, connect with their customers, and drive traffic to their Web sites. They are easy to update and require no HTML or programming knowledge.

For more information on Business Blogs and ongoing updates, visit
http://flyte.blogs.com/business_blogs_and_blog_marketing

Peer-to-Peer Marketing: Word-of-mouth recommendations carry a lot of weight. Make it easy on your site visitors to spread the word by adding tools such as Share This Page with a Friend and Recommend This Site that allow visitors to send emails right from your Web page to a friend or associate. The email can contain links back to your Web site and even include your own marketing message.

How do I get people to take action once they get to my site?

Too many Web site owners are very concerned about driving traffic to their Web site but completely ignore visitors once they get there. Don't let this be you. The act of getting someone to take action at your Web site is called "conversion."

To convert prospects into customers, you need to determine what action you want them to take. Are you trying to get people to subscribe to an email newsletter? To provide their contact information? To complete a contact form or call your 800 number? To buy a product online?

It's easy for people to lose interest and click away. Keep your focus on your visitors and the problems they are trying to solve, not what you are trying to sell them.

Here are some good tips for designing a site that gets people to take action:

- Limit the links on each page; studies show that the more choices people have, the more likely they'll choose or buy nothing…fearing that they'll make a poor choice.

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- Keep your layout clean and simple. White space is your friend.
- Keep your copy short and focused on your visitor. Break up long paragraphs and use bold and italics to make copy easier to read (**never** underline a word unless it's a link)!
- Use descriptive page titles and headers to help get your message across.
- End each page with a call-to-action or an invitation to take the next step. Don't assume that your visitor will know what to do next.

How will I know if my site is successful?

Take a look at your business goals after 3 or 6 months. Is your Web site helping you reach them? If so, set more challenging goals! If not, take a look at your traffic reports to determine if you need more traffic, or if you need to convert more visitors into customers.

To learn more about how to read traffic reports, visit http://www.flyte.biz/resources/newsletters/05/04-reading-traffic-reports.html

In Conclusion

Developing a Web site can often seem like an overwhelming task when you first begin. Don't have unrealistic expectations for your Web site…or yourself.

Review the questions above and your answers. Come up with a plan and approach it step-by-step. Working with a professional firm may seem more expensive at first, but it will ultimately pay off in time, money and results.

About flyte new media

Based in Portland, Maine, flyte new media is a full-service Web design and Internet marketing firm with expertise in creating professional sites backed by e-commerce and database-driven solutions. They support their clients' Web sites with search engine optimization, email marketing campaigns, business blogs and peer-to-peer marketing. flyte's portfolio includes clients and projects throughout the United States. For more information, visit http://www.flyte.biz.

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Added Bonus:
Flyte's Top 10 Favorite Web Site Tools:

These are all tried and true products that flyte returns to time and again when building our clients' Web sites.

- **Urchin –** Although there are a lot of quality traffic report programs out there, I find the detailed reports and on-the-fly graphs and charts an incredible tool in understanding the behavior of visitors at a Web site. http://www.urchin.com
- **PayPal –** For site owners who don't have a Merchant Account and want to test selling products or services over the Web, PayPal is a great solution. The fees are very reasonable and setup is a snap. Because of its tight integration with eBay, it's recognized across the Web. https://www.paypal.com/us/mrb/pal=HP8FF4WUDDNML
- **Miva Merchant –** For site owners who need a more robust shopping cart solution, Miva is a good choice. It often comes included with hosting plans and can be easily configured to take a wide variety of payments and offer an endless supply of shipping options. Since it has such a large user base, many companies have developed 3rd party modules that can enhance your store. http://www.miva.com
- **Constant Contact –** There are several good online services available that will help you manage your email marketing campaigns…none we've found that are better than Constant Contact. There's a wide variety of templates, online and telephone support, and affordable fees. It just doesn't get any better than this. http://reseller.constantcontact.com/index.jsp?pn=flytenewmedia
- **TypePad –** We've tried a number of different blog products out there, but none matches the ease-of-use and flexibility of TypePad. You can start on the $4.95 plan, or upgrade to tweak the blog to your heart's content. http://www.typepad.com
- **Keyword Tracker –** This free tool allows you to track your site's rank under a number of search terms at Google. It can also keep track of how many people are linking to you. You can sign up at http://www.digitalpoint.com/tools/keywords/ and read our step-by-step tutorial here: http://flyte.biz/resources/newsletters/05/03-keyword-tracker.html
- **WordTracker –** Why guess what your prospects are searching for when you can know? WordTracker will test your keyphrases by suggesting alternatives and finding out how many people have searched for those terms in the last 2 months and how much competition you have for each search term, providing you with a Keyword Effectiveness Index, or KEI. You can license the software by the day, week, month or year. http://www.wordtracker.com
- **Amazon Associates Program -** Many of the authors we've worked with have found they make more per book from Amazon's Associates Program

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than they do from their own publisher for each book published! Whether you're promoting your own book or someone else's, you might as well get credit. http://www.amazon.com

- **Radar –** Any Web site 10 pages or more can benefit from a site search. Radar, flyte's own search, provides quick results, allows you to hide pages or directories of your site from the search, and constantly updates itself. It will even show you reports of what searches are being performed at your site and which searches are pulling up no results. Contact flyte for more information: http://www.flyte.biz

- **flyte: what works online –** flyte's blog is updated several times a week with new information on building a better Web site, search engines, email marketing, and business blog tips. If you are responsible for a Web site, you should be checking in regularly or subscribing to a free feed. http://flyte.blogs.com

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