

The seven most common mistakes in building a website

The internet is a fantastic place to network, to buy and sell, and to exchange information. There are websites in all shapes and sizes, for all sorts of reasons. Anyone can have a website at little or no cost. Most websites, however, are a waste of time and money. Self-built websites (and some professionally designed sites) show that the website builder has fallen into the trap of one or more of the following mistakes:

- The website is confusing and / or difficult to navigate
- Style is developed at the cost of content
- The information on the website is not regularly updated
- The website does not validate
- The website is inaccessible to sections of the community
- Over-reliance on WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) editors
- The website is 'invisible'

Perhaps the most common problem with many websites is usability. By usability, we mean the ease with which users can find the information they require from the website. There are professional usability consultants who fully test websites for usability in usability labs. For many websites this is an unnecessary expense, and most of the issues of usability can be confronted at source. Websites should be readable without styling and all information should be in text. Navigation and hyperlinks should be intuitive, and the navigation area should be clearly differentiated from the main content of the page. It should also be possible for the website users to find the information (s)he requires within a maximum of three clicks. For relatively simple websites this means that the titles of navigation links and the text for hyperlinks clearly indicates exactly where the click will take the user; for larger or more complex sites an accurate search function is required. If these points are followed the website will almost certainly be usable. To check on the usability of your sites, invite a number of people to work through the site on a series of tasks, and ask them to note any difficulties they have and how easy the site is to understand and navigate. Then make any minor adjustments based upon their comments. For example, you may have a navigation button called 'activities', which some users may think points to a page of interactive games, when actually it points to a page that states what you / your organisation does. At this point you may think about changing the title of the button to 'what we do'.

The second common problem with some websites is the triumph of style over content. Just because, using CSS you can give multiple elements of your website a background image, or you can build a really snazzy Flash intro, that doesn't mean you have to. Flash, for example is a superb technology in that enables the development of animated vector graphics at relatively low bandwidths, giving web designers the opportunity to animate at little cost to loading times. There are some bandwidth considerations, though, and the overuse of Flash can lead to longer loading times, and thus, user boredom. More importantly, too much distraction can be detrimental to the message. Style, in all its forms should be there to enhance and emphasise the central message of the website, not distract the user. By all means style your site (it would be a tad boring if all websites were just black text on a white background), but always remain focused on what you want the website to say, and use styling accordingly. There is a place for graphics, animation, video, sound and

multiple forms of interactivity within websites, but not at the expense of the central message.

The third common problem occurs when, with a rush of enthusiasm, you build your beautiful, informative website, and then just leave it. In six months time it is full of out-of-date information. If your website is for a community group, for example it is April, and you have a link on the site to a PDF version of your current newsletter, please ensure that the link goes to the April newsletter, not the January or March newsletter. If you sell services and include your fees or prices on your website, update the site when those fees or prices change. It seems obvious, but there are many, many out-of-date websites out there, and the user who clicks through an out-of-date site is likely to be disappointed and unlikely to visit again.

Next we have the problem of validation. Your website look great, and the information on it is clearly presented and up-to-date. Why bother validating? There are lots of reasons. If the site does not validate, you are dependent to some extent on the browser 'guessing' how the site should render, and some browsers are more forgiving than others. Unless you have tested your site in every common browser you will not necessarily know how it appears on the screens of the people you are trying to reach. In terms of 'future-proofing', to produce valid sites will mean that your websites should remain OK for years to come.

Closely related to validation and usability is accessibility. Legally, websites should be accessible to as wide a range of users as possible, and from a practical point of view, do you really want to make your site unusable to whole sections of the community? If a site validates it is most of the way to being accessible. On top of validation, you should provide links to the main content immediately beneath the masthead prior to any navigation, to enable people using screen readers not to have to listen to the navigation on every page unless they wish to. You should also test your site for issues relating to colour blindness, and avoid any colour combinations that cause shimmering, as this can be very detrimental to people with photo-sensitive epilepsy.

Maybe the most common problem of all for people relatively new to web design is an over-reliance on WYSIWYG editors. Although some are much better than others, they can produce overblown code, and the greater the amount of code, the greater the bandwidth, and thus the longer it takes for the page to load. XHTML is a very simple language; it really pays to be able to code by hand. By all means use the WYSIWYG editor but then review and tidy up the code by hand, or use the excellent free program [HTML Tidy](#).

Follow all these points and you have a valid, accessible, up-to-date, informative website. But nobody visits it. To all intents and purposes it is invisible. It needs to be seen and indexed by the search engines. By search engines, in reality we now mean Google, as worldwide the majority of web users would use Google to search web. How do we get Google to search and index our site? Firstly, we ensure that all the appropriate meta-tags, such as keywords are in place in the <head> of the page. Try to also ensure that these keywords also appear (naturally) relatively early in the text of the page. The one meta-tag that always seems to be overlooked is <title>. The number of pages on the internet title is 'Contact Page' or 'About Us' is incredible. Contact who? About whom? As well as having a valid site with the appropriate meta-tags, visibility is also enhanced by incoming links. Try to persuade webmasters of sites that relate to yours to link to you. Finally tell Google your page exists. Create an XML sitemap (there are many sites on the internet that will do it for you without charge) and submit it to Google. There is a lot more to SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) than this, but this minimum effort will at least make you site visible.

To sum up: It is easy to make a poor website that no-one will visit. With only a little thought and effort you can make a good website that people will visit; not necessarily in their droves, but build it and they will come.

For more information about web design you could visit home page:

www.stewartkirkresearch.co.uk.