

Five Rules for Website Redesign

A recipe for success

Developing a new website can be a daunting task, and redesigning an already existing website can come with many similar struggles. However, with effective planning and preparation you can turn that old, outdated website into a useful tool that not only communicates your message to your audience, but also creates excitement, invites repeat visits, collects necessary data, and allows for interaction among visitors.

1 Never Sacrifice Your Message Just to Use Technology

Good design and flow add a level of credibility to your website. To begin the process of website redesign, you will need a well thought-out plan. At the start of the process, many website owners become enamored with bells and whistles that are available for their site, such as Flash movies, animation and other rich media, which have become increasingly popular over the years. On the surface, it would appear that these various types of technology might be appealing; however, website owners should keep in mind who they are designing their site for when in the process of choosing the most current site design. Your audience comes to your site with a particular need in mind. If you can address their need with creative tools, by all means take advantage of the latest technology; however, just because you can do it, doesn't mean you should. Overwhelming flash



However, design is only half the battle. Once again, a well thought-out plan will eliminate many surprises when redesigning your site, as well as the headaches associated with going over budget and missing important features.

Everything you do on your website should align with the mission of your organization. You may even want to consider putting together a website committee, or hiring a consultant to help you work through all the possibilities and explain the technology.

Whether you're going at it alone or working with a committee or consultant, you'll want to make sure that you answer some important questions up front. First, define the purpose of your website. Is it to build awareness, increase vocations, increase sales of a product, reduce paper cost, or a combination of these?

Next, define your target audience. Is it members, staff, board members, potential donors, or those interested in vocations? Simply put, spend time understanding your audience and develop your site around their needs.

You'll also want to define the scope of your website. Are you updating the content and menu items as well as the look and feel? If you are rewriting content, you may want to get others involved who can help with the writing.

animations, moving objects, animated characters, and more might be irritating to your audience, not to mention users might need to constantly install updates just to see your content. Bells and whistles are attributes of a website that need to be measured and tested to see if they increase visitor traffic or drive it away. Your content should always come first. Design, along with great tech features, should only enhance your message and never detract from it.

2 Plan and You'll Succeed

There's an old adage that says if you fail to plan, you plan to fail. Designing a beautiful and professional website is a must, so hire a good designer who can provide you with the look and feel that speaks to your audience.

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Make sure all of your content is organized by keeping the following questions in mind: What is going to be on your website? Will you have a certain amount of pages? Are you including forms or databases? Remember, you will want to group together pages of similar interest.

Choose a website style and size and then address issues such as standard screen widths, fonts, colors, graphics, etc. Do you want a website that is hip and trendy or prayerfully contemplative? What about a traditional, contemporary, or big business site? A good graphics company can help design a look that fits your message, but begin with a basic understanding of what overall theme you want to use. This process can take some time and you might need some ideas and input from professionals in the field. By looking at different websites with similar interests, you may find ideas on which to model your website.

No great plan would be complete without establishing responsibilities and deadlines. This is especially important when working with a team or committee as it will eliminate any bottleneck and keep the pace and activity moving. Make sure you set deadlines and define your target completion date. Set intermediate deadlines for different phases if necessary, such as completing flowchart, design, content, testing, etc. If you are working with a design company or technology team, include them in this process and you'll see your new website online according to your time frame.

Finally, consider database, server, and security needs. Address the needs of a member database, forms for registration or other transactions, and products for sale that need SSL

(Secure Sockets Layer) for secure transactions. Simply make a list and define on paper as much as you can.

3 Be Deliberate About Your Content and Navigation

Your content will change as you go, but be sure to consider everything at the beginning. It will be easier to eliminate things down the road than attempt to add more, which can, and usually will, increase your budget and move your deadline further out. Content organization is a task for an entire team. Even if you are working alone, get input from others. This task requires little understanding of technology, but some experience online would be helpful. All good websites have great flow and consider all user levels. Spend time on your content and flow and your visitors will feel comfortable navigating around on your website.

You can build a flowchart or site map using Visio or Excel; this will give you a good understanding of how your visitors will navigate to each page. Documenting how you get from one page to another will make it easier down the line when you change something and need to update links on your site.

Begin with categorizing your content by defining your main categories. Consider categories such as products, services, programs, organizational information, history, communication, etc. Next, organize your sub-pages: who we are, what we do, where we serve, etc. Consider the placement of your menu and other navigational tools. What style do you want your drop down/pull outs in - JavaScript menus, rollovers, or static text menus? Make good use of your

footer area. Many users will scroll to the bottom to find your contact information, directions, etc. Don't forget to include bread crumb navigation -- this will allow visitors to get back to previously viewed pages.

4 Design to Enhance Your Site

Graphics should always enhance your website. This cannot be emphasized enough. No one comes to your website to see how beautiful it looks. Visitors come for content. A website littered with links, ads, and random graphics can be difficult to navigate.

When laying out your website choose complimentary colors. Take into consideration your organization's color(s) or marketing campaign. Make your color choices easy on the eye with good contrast. If you don't have access to a good graphics program or are not a designer, consider hiring one.

Put thought into your menu placement. Do you want a horizontal menu or a vertical menu? Focus your menu on your featured pages. It's better to have a few main categories with sub-sections underneath than a long list of links and pages. You'll also want to build your menu for future scalability. There are some nice JavaScript menus out there, do your research and see what others are using.

No website is complete without your logo. If you don't have one, then that's a good place to start. Develop a logo and a brand that's fitting and timeless and represents your organization. Add your logo to every page as well as a link back to your home page.

Use the footer on your website for increased navigation. Google and other search engines need to "crawl" your site to index it within their database. Adding simple text menus at the bottom to every area of your site will allow crawlers to find all of your content. You can also use your footer for directions, newsletter subscriptions, link to your blog, other websites you own and operate, and of course your contact information or your Contact Us page.

Use CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) to control your entire site. CSS can control colors, navigation, menus, borders, tables and more. It also allows your markup language of choice to perform faster, a function for which it was originally created.

5 Test Your Site Before Going Live

There is only one way to roll out a successful website - test, test and re-test. Do not make the mistake of testing your website after it goes live and then try to fix the problems. Be proactive by considering every possible functionality on your site in an online test environment.

Test your website in all browsers and on different computers. Test with different screen resolutions and on different operating systems. Don't forget web enabled devices such as Blackberry, iPhone and Android phones. You'll want to test for broken links and images on all pages. You can find an online service where you can perform these tests for free. Test your forms to make sure no one can submit a blank form. Eliminate spam to your forms by adding a captcha that

will force additional information to be entered to confirm the user is a human.

Test security by defining and assessing security risks. Define what the security requirements are and how information is classified. Develop a security policy about how data will be monitored and who is responsible. List everything that is used, interacted with, or altered by the website. For very simple systems with no sensitive data, insist on some standard security baselines for the project. If the website or web application is more complex or includes sensitive data, consider creating a threat model and identify the threats and possible vulnerabilities.

Testing is not just about preventing errors, it is also about your website being available, fast, complying with legal and regulatory requirements, and preventing release of confidential information to unauthorized users. Protect your business data and intellectual property from misuse or loss.

By following these five website redesign rules, you can eliminate many of the complications that come along with redesign. These rules can help turn your old or non-existent website into a useful tool that communicates your message to your audience. ☀

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