"creating a website: dos and don'ts"

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In today's business environment, having a website that looks great and functions smoothly is essential to your immediate and long term success. And while there are many web design tools available that can ease the process, actually creating your website can be a daunting task. But done properly, an effective website will add tremendous value to how your customers, and potential customers, perceive your company. As the "front door" to your business, your website should showcase your brand values with appropriate images and relevant content. Easy navigation reflects on the ease of working with your company. With commercial sites, the process of purchasing products needs to be seamless or you will lose business and customers.

Dos"

1) **Plan a site map.** Your first step is to build a site map, or blueprint, for what content will be included and where it should appear. This critical step helps you, your design team, and programmers focus on exactly what the mission of the site should be, and what special functions you might need to make the site run flawlessly. Most importantly, it helps avoid miscommunication and last minute redesigns that can complicate the entire process. Spend time designing your site map. It's well worth the effort.

2) **Use branded content.** Your website is a reflection of your company and as a marketing tool should strengthen your brand. It's important to have visually impactful designs that always reflect what the company is about, and the values you want to project. Clearly, an industrial company will have a very different "look and feel" than a restaurant, but both must consider what every image and design element reflects about their company. Often new branding is launched with the website first, then deployed through other advertising and marketing initiatives.

3) Create product and service centered content.

What you do, and how well you do it, should be clear in the first few seconds someone arrives at your site. The content and images you use should accurately reflect your core business. When showing product images, make sure they are strong and sharp. Low quality images imply shoddy merchandise. Product descriptions should accurate and, when possible, describe its benefits. Often it's valuable to incorporate customer testimonials, star ratings or competitive rankings on the homepage to let your visitors know how solid your company is.

4) Make use of strong calls to actions.

What exactly do you want visitors to do when they visit your website? Buy a product or service directly online? Visit your store? Sign up for a newsletter? Whatever interaction you want, be direct in your messaging and use strong "calls to action." Don't just show your product, tell them where and how to buy it, and why to take action now! Your conversion rates will always go up when you have clear "calls to action" that motivate your customers to act, and an easy process to accomplish it.

5) **Make smart use of space, sizing and headlines.** As web design has evolved so have rules and "best practices" for designing and formatting a site. Here are just a few elements to consider. Make sure your headlines are bold and informative to capture attention and let viewers know what information follows. Important content should appear "above the fold" as should important links. An effective font and use of white space is vital for reading comprehension, so make sure to incorporate good spacing and proper margins. And, don't be tempted to cram too much information on a single page.

6) **Create your mobile strategy at the same time as your desktop strategy.** As the world has shifted to a much more mobile environment, it's imperative that your site is optimized for mobile platforms. Your site should be designed from the start to be responsive and accommodate how it will appear on mobile devices. It is likely that a large percentage of customers will connect to your site from a Smartphone or tablet. A site that isn't optimized for mobile is likely to give an impression of unprofessionalism.

7)

Make use of open source platforms.

There are a number of advantages to using an open-source platform like WordPress with a Content Management System (CMS) for web design and maintenance. They are generally more cost effective and give you more features for your money. Proprietary software can be costly and can lock you into a specific vendor while any developer can access an open-source platform. Open source platforms are frequently updated and work well with other systems.

8)

Perform regular maintenance. After your website is launched it's critical to perform regular maintenance to ensure it functions properly. You'll need updates to security elements, plug-ins and themes and you should perform regular backups of your site to be safe from crashes. Some hosting companies will perform these services if included in your hosting package.

Dont's

1) **Build a professional website without professional help.** If you are building a website for personal interest or a simple site of 2 or 3 pages, there are programs available that can make it fairly simple for you. But for a business of any size, expert help is called for. Professional web designers are experienced in their craft and can advise you in every phase of the process. They know about the latest web technology and the best practices for design and navigation. They provide a level of expertise that can bring your company to a new level of success.

2) **Make them search for what they want.** Website visitors want to find the information they're looking for on your website easily and quickly. In many cases, you have but a few seconds to impress and capture their attention. A site that is confusing, does not navigate well or neglects to include important information will quickly turn customers away. In your initial planning, think about the most common and important questions a customer will want answered and make sure they are easy to find.

3) **Overwhelm a customer.** Because digital content does not have the same size limitations as other mediums, like print, it's easy to overwhelm a visitor with information they don't want or need. Don't cram too much onto a page or it will look cluttered. If you have many products or services, categorize them and display them on separate pages. Keep your pages simple and give customers clear paths to navigate from every page so that they can find specifically what they are looking for quickly.

4) **Assume you'll get visitors right away.** Your website can be the backbone of your marketing strategy, but it isn't your entire strategy. Your advertising and marketing plans should all be in sync to generate web traffic and gain customers. But just building the website isn't a guarantee that potential customers will find it. You need to combine great website design with effective Search Engine Optimization (SEO) that should include effective keywords, proper preparation and submission of sitemaps to Google and Bing. Effective SEO has become very sophisticated and your web design professionals should guide you to maximize its potential.

5) **Link to social media without consideration.** Social media is a very different form of communicating with your customers and how your website interconnects with those platforms must be carefully decided. While a website is static, your social status is dynamic and measured by followers. Linking from a website to a small social following can easily leave the impression that your company is not substantial and customers will move on. In general you'll want to build your social following first, then link to the website. If you plan to incorporate social media in your marketing plans, consult with a social media specialist.

6) **Have a blog if you don't update it.** A blog can be a very effective tool to keep your customers engaged. But it can easily turn them off if not updated regularly. Seeing a largely empty and outdated blog gives the impression that your company either doesn't have the manpower to update it, or doesn't care to put in the effort; either way, it presents a negative impression. If, however you engage with a social media specialist you'll be assured that the content will be updated regularly and know that it will align with your overall marketing strategy.

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While not a comprehensive list, the above "Do's and Don'ts" show that there are many important nuances to creating an effective, engaging and visually appealing website. The sheer scope and complexity of building a great site can be intimidating but, when done right, the results will provide a significant return on your investment.

At Sharkey Advertising we understand the importance a great website can have on your bottom line. And, while web trends may come and go, we have always held on to our core values of strong visual design, intuitive user interfaces, and content creation that reinforces your brand values. From the beginning of the process to the end, we will work with you to turn your brilliant ideas into digital realities.

Sharkey Advertising provides complete online solutions from total web design or redesigns, to SEO and Social Media management. We offer content creation, image research and hosting solutions as well as a powerful email marketing platform to help drive your business.

Sharkey Advertising knows how to build great websites. Let us build one for you.

Fran Sharkey, Principal, CEO
fran@sharkeyadvertising.com
631-224-9220

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