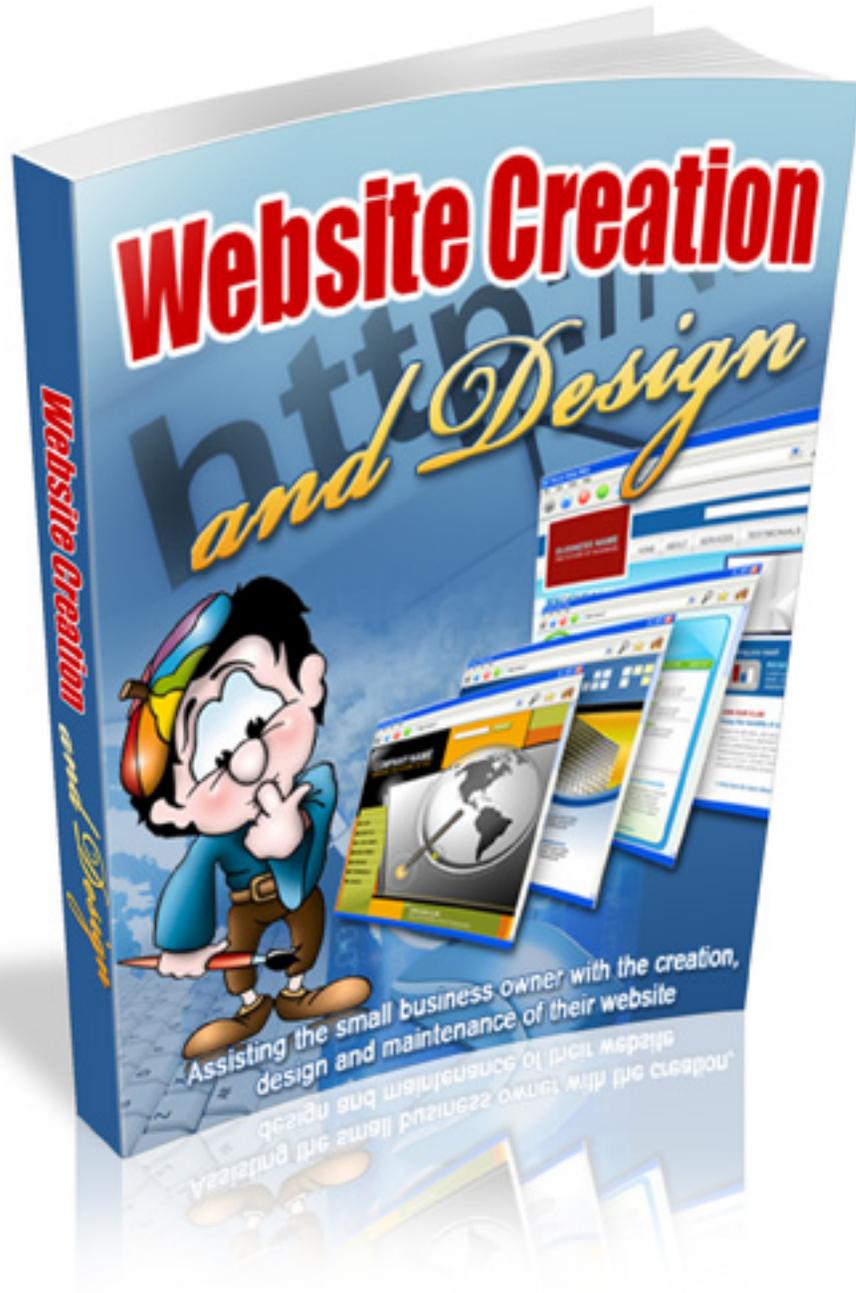


Website Design, Creation and Advice



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How to Choose the Best Website Design for Your Business

Whether your business has been established offline for years or whether it is a new business altogether, the design of your website must coincide with your overall brand image and sales goals.

Evaluate the Purpose of your Website

The first obstacle in determining your website design is to evaluate its purpose. If you are a retail business, you most likely will need a shopping cart feature. However, if you are a consulting firm, you may only want to list your contact information or an application for service. Evaluating the purpose of your website will help determine the features you need and those you can live without.

Determine the Complexity of your Site

Again, if your business sells many different kinds of widgets, then you will need a shopping cart. If your widgets are self-explanatory, (i.e. impulse items), then perhaps you simply need a page for each category of widget. The page can list each item, a short description, and a link to add it to the customer's shopping cart.

However, if your business is selling widgets which need more explanation, perhaps bigger ticket items, then you might need a single page for each widget. You may even need several pages for each widget's specifications.

If your business is informational services, for example consulting, then perhaps your site can remain fairly simple. There is no need for a shopping cart of hundreds of pages showcasing each item. You may have a few different consulting packages, information on each, a sales letter, a contact us page, and about us page, and a home page. Perhaps a testimonial page for added persuasion. Although it may contain a significant amount of text, this would be a fairly simple website design compared to other businesses.

Choose a Theme

If you don't already have a brand image, logo, and colors, then you need to decide what your website will actually look like. When choosing a visual theme, be sure to make it match your business, but also try to make your site stand out from the crowd. For example, moving companies all tend to have a picture of a moving truck/van and a happy family next to a nice suburban house. That's fine, if it in fact works to persuade your customers to buy. But also consider the power of standing apart from the crowd by presenting a more clever visual display on your website. It could work well to draw customers to your site.

Design your Website

You are now ready to design your website! Use your chosen theme to create cohesion within your website, whether it has a simple or complex design. And of course, remember to always design with the intent to carry out the purpose of your website as it pertains to your business. In

other words, avoid design that exists solely for design and does not serve a functional purpose for growing your business.

What's in a Domain Suffix

So you want to create a website and you have your domain name almost figured out. How do you know which suffix you should use? The suffix (end) of a domain name is the portion that comes after the "dot" at the end of the domain name. It is also referred to as the Top Level Domain or the TLD. Which top level domain your website belongs to depends on the nature of your site. Here is a little explanation to help you choose.

DomainName.com

The most commonly used TLD is the .com suffix. It was intended for use by commercial businesses, but now there are many .com websites that do not necessarily sell anything. Many online businesses with .com suffixes also operate offline or as brick-and-mortar businesses. For example, BestBuy.com and HomeDepot.com. Some websites, however, do operate solely with an online storefront like Batteries4Less.com or Amazon.com.

DomainName.net

The .net suffix might be one of the others you have heard about. This one represents websites that are part of a network organization. For example, Comcast.net or TheUnion.net. You probably know of people who have an email address with the .net suffix. That means they are part of a network organization.

DomainName.gov

This suffix refers to websites which represent a government entity. When you visit a website with .gov at the end of the domain name, you know you are on an official government site. For example, USA.gov or WhiteHouse.gov.

DomainName.mil

This top level domain is reserved for military websites only. While the suffix .gov refers to websites representing all branches of government, .mil refers to only military sites. For example, the U.S. Department of Defense has a website at www.defense.gov. The U.S. Air Force has a website address at www.AirForce.gov.

DomainName.edu

This suffix stands for all websites having to do with education. For example, Harvard.edu or Yale.edu. Some universities will also have .com or .net sites, but all of them have .edu websites.

DomainName.org

The .org suffix stands for “organization” and refers to the top level domain specifically representing non-profit organizations. For example, RedCross.org or SalvationArmy.org.

DomainName.ca

This suffix refers to websites for the country of Canada. (Not to be confused with the suffix for the state of California, which is domainname.ca.gov.)

DomainName.biz

This is quickly becoming a popular suffix for businesses as well as .com. This top level domain was intended for the business community. For example, Ad-Design.biz or Cupid.biz.

DomainName.coop

The cooperative top level domain name is .coop. For example, FoodCoop.coop or CGIN.coop.

Website Design Terminology

Technical jargon can sometimes make a simple task seem overwhelming. To ensure that language barriers don't get in the way of your website design, here are some definitions of popular web design terms:

Accessibility: Websites with high accessibility are those that are very usable by people with disabilities (i.e. visually, hearing or physically impaired or color blind).

Affiliate Program: An affiliate program is an agreement setup between two parties, (1) the marketer and (2) the affiliate/associate in which the marketer pays a commission for each lead or each sale that results from the affiliate's efforts.

Cascading Style Sheets (CSS): A language that defines design elements on a webpage, such as font, color, and layout.

Dedicated Server: A Web server that is owned or leased by the business, giving the business most (or all) rights to use and control over the server.

DNS: Acronym for “Domain Name Service” which translates your domain name into your IP address so the server knows where to send the request when somebody types in your domain name.

Domain Name: The name used to identify a computer on the Internet. Your website's domain name is mapped to its IP address.

Embedded Style: A CSS style that affects the elements on a single page and is written in the head of the XHTML document.

Exit Page: The last page a visitor views before leaving your site. It is analyzed carefully because it is viewed as the last chance you had to influence your visitor before they decided to leave your site for whatever reason. Therefore, it is important to test and analyze your exit pages to improve your website performance.

Entry Page: The first page your visitors see when landing on your website. This page is important because it is where visitors are being sent from search engines and other links. Improve your entry pages by using links and placing other important information for your visitors.

External Style Sheet: A CSS that exists as an external document and therefore can be referred to by other documents.

Fixed Width Layout: A layout with a set size which remains that size no matter how big or small the user adjusts his browser window. Often preferred by designers because of their ability to make adjustments and know exactly how they will look as the final product.

Heuristics: Rules of thumb that apply to web pages.

HTML: Acronym for "Hypertext Markup Language", the code used to design web pages.

Hyperlink: A word, phrase, or image that connects or "links" the current page to another page. The user clicks on the hyperlink to get to the other page. When plain text includes hyperlinks, it is considered "hypertext".

Inline Elements: Elements in an HTML document that are found among the text. (A.k.a. text level elements.)

Keyword: The word(s) that is designed by the author of the website to get picked up by search engines. Keywords usually reflect the overall focus of a webpage because that is what a person would type into a search engine to find your page.

SEO: Acronym for "search engine optimization" and is the practice of designing a webpage for the best results (highest on the page) as returned by the search engines.

CSS Explained

CSS is an acronym for Cascading Style Sheets, which is a style sheet language used in website design. Most often it is used to describe a presentation format for a webpage that is written in HTML or XHTML code.

CSS was created to make web design much faster. Web designers who would write the HTML or XHTML code for a webpage were being asked to uphold certain visual aspects of a page

such as font, colors, and layout. This soon became a time-consuming task for web designers and so web design with these desired aspects became very expensive to create. Hence, CSS was born.

In the early years of the World Wide Web, you had to hire a web designer who was fluent in HTML or another coding language to create your website for you.

However, you do not necessarily need to know HTML in order to design a webpage using CSS. Software programs like Dreamweaver allow beginning web designers to create web pages using CSS without having to know HTML code.

Many designers use CSS to create templates. These templates help a designer move more quickly through the design process when using a cohesive theme throughout an entire website. The author of a webpage will link that document to a CSS style sheet to quickly achieve the formatting he desires.

A CSS template also comes in handy when multiple users are working together to create a webpage. For example, a designer might use CSS to create a template with the specific fonts, colors, and layout he or she desires. Then, a content writer (who does not know CSS or HTML) might use that same style sheet and simply insert the content into the appropriate textual areas. This allows the content writer to work quickly and efficiently through a CSS document without have to know the technical side of web design.

When a web browser reads a style sheet, it will automatically format the document based upon the design elements that it specifies.

There are three ways to insert CSS: external style sheet, internal style sheet, and inline style. When you want to apply a style to several pages, it is best to use an external style sheet. In this case, you have the power to change the look of an entire website just by changing one file. On the other hand, if you want a single document to have a unique style, then you want to use an internal style sheet. Inline style sheets are not used that often because they mix content and style code, which usually defeats the purpose of CSS.

CSS can save loads of time when you are creating a website, especially with multiple pages. There is much more to learn about CSS, this is just a starting point for those wondering what CSS is and how it can help them in their website design.

Website Designs with Staying Power

Driving traffic to your website is only half the battle. To really experience success with your website, you need to get those users to stay on your site. When your users stay on your website, you can expect these positive results:

- Lower bounce rate
- Higher search engine ranking

- More opportunity to influence them
- More loyal visitors
- Higher referral rates

So, a website with staying power is a successful one. Here are some practices that will BOOST your website's staying power:

- **Link Titles** –A link title is that short description that pops up when you hover your mouse over an in-text link. Users like knowing where they're going before they click on a link.
- **Appealing Design** – Attractive colors, up-to-date look, easy to read.
- **Good Balance between Ads and Content** – Strike a balance between the number of ads you display and the amount of truly useful content you have on your site. Remember, people come there first to get information. If they are impressed with your site, they will explore the products you promote and the businesses you recommend.
- **Strong Connection between Products and Need** – When the ads make sense to them, they feel at home. Even if they don't click on the ads you display on your site, they will be more likely to return if they can relate to them. Example: If you are over 22 years old, try watching MTV for an hour. Watch the ads... are you their target market? Do you feel uncomfortable? Yeah.
- **Good Use of Media** – Use photos, videos and audio clips to break up lots of text.
- **Intuitive Navigation and Organized Layout** – Online users are all about efficiency and usability. Navigation that makes sense coupled with an organized layout produces an overall easy-to-use website.
- **Search Feature** – Users will appreciate a search feature on your site if you have extensive content (another plus) when they are looking for something specific.

Here are some practices that will KILL your website's staying power:

- **Slow-loading Flash Presentations** – They're pretty, but not functional.
- **High Quantities of Advertisements** – When your site has too many ads and very little content, your users will flee.
- **Ugly/Annoying Advertisements** – Really, if you can control this, your site will be more successful. Example: Ads that flicker or flash neon colors at your users. People can only stand that for so long before they vacate.
- **Pop-up or Hovering Windows** – Once again, annoying.
- **Distracting Backgrounds** – As tempting as it is to choose that Hello Kitty patterned background, don't do it.
- **Anything Offensive** – When you're trying to win people over, you generally don't want to offend them.

How Can I Build my Website for Free

Superior website creation and design can definitely be costly. A great web designer could cost you thousands of dollars. However, there are a few options that may help you if you are on a tight budget – or if you have no budget - for website design. Doing it yourself is the name of the game. But, you don't have to have design experience to make a decent website. In fact, you can even get someone else to do it for free! Read on to find out how:

Use your Web Host's Software to Build your Website for Free

Many web hosting services will actually offer you free website builder software. This software typically involves templates and easy or automatic flash tools for beginners. If you have yet to get a web host, then you may want to do that first before you worry about building your site.

Use an Online Template to Build your Website for Free

There are several online tools to help you build a basic website for free. Try typing "free web design" into your search engine and see how many pop up. Some will advertise to you and some will want to post ads on your website. Others will give you free website design on a trial basis.

Use Open Source Software to Build your Website for Free

Open source software is that which is without a traditional copyright license. It is "open" to users with the intention that other coders will improve and update its source code in order to develop a better designed software program. This means that the software is available for free download. The software may have bugs, but in general it is a good way to get your website designed for free.

Recruit an Intern or Student Designer to Build your Website for Free

Students and interns are a great resource for low-cost, cutting edge web design. Most of them are still in school or have limited experience, which is okay for you if you are just looking to get it done for free. Many of these young people have amazing design skills and are truly artistic. Their generation has grown up developing websites for fun in their spare time. You may just find a student designer who is just as good as a professional.

Students need references for their resume and published material for their portfolio, hence you can help them get what they want and get your website built for free or for a very low cost. Seek them out by placing an ad in the online classifieds (or offline classifieds for your area) for an intern web designer.

Six Steps to Website Design for Beginners

You have established your domain name, registered it, and signed up for web hosting service. You are now ready to design your website. For beginners, this step can seem overwhelming, but it doesn't have to be complicated. Keep in mind the following considerations when beginning your website design and you will be off to a good start.

Step 1: Keep it Simple, Stupid.

There are so many choices when it comes to designing your website. Just remember to keep it as simple as possible for your users to navigate through your site. At no point should your user feel confused or lost in terms of where they are in your site. If they are reading an article or

viewing a product page, they should easily be able to back track to your homepage or back to search results.

Step 2: Get the Right Software

Choosing the right software can avoid a lot of frustrations in your website design. Dreamweaver and CoffeeCup are good candidates for beginners. CoffeeCup has been known to be a bit more frustrating if you are a picky designer, but Dreamweaver has the higher price tag. If you plan to do more website design in the future, you may want to make the investment and get Dreamweaver.

Step 3: Draw Out Your Website Layout

It is important that you do this step before you begin designing. It will save you a lot of hassle and frustration when you actually sit down to hammer out each web page. You can also use programs like Freehand or Fireworks to map out a website plan. Anything you can use to give you a clear understanding of where you are going will do just fine. Include a hierarchy of pages, which pages fall under which menus, and how your navigation will look.

Step 4: Gather your Images and other Media Files for Easy Upload

You are almost ready to begin the actual design part of your website. First, though, do yourself a favor and get all of your media files organized. When you have them all in place on your computer, go ahead and begin designing. When you need to insert an image or link to a media file, everything is right there in one spot.

Step 5: Design Templates

The next step in designing your website is to create your templates or CSS files. This allows you to easily create many web pages with the same overall look and layout. If you need to make change to the look or layout later, you will only need to change the template file instead of changing every single web page.

Step 6: Begin Designing, Page by Page

It is almost always easier to design new web pages and assign them a CSS template rather than the other way around. So once you have your template(s) in place, then get down to it and begin working through your website design, page by page. Use your layout drawing as your guideline, checking off each page as you go. When you need a media file or link, simply go to your pre-organized file with all of your media.

Using this method, you should have fairly little trouble designing your website. Once you're finished designing and have double checked your work for spelling errors and broken links, etc., you are ready to go live with your website.

Dreamweaver or CoffeeCup for Website Design

There are a few good programs for website design. Which one you choose will depend on the level of experience you have with website design and HTML code. There are freeware programs like 1st Page and HTML-Kit, or Notepad for those who are strictly writing code for their website design. However, if you do not know HTML code and have no desire to learn website design in that much detail, Dreamweaver or CoffeeCup may be the better option for you. Let's compare the two programs.

Both Dreamweaver and CoffeeCup allow the user to work with templates, backgrounds, textures, fonts, and more. They are both fairly user friendly for beginners who may not be fluent in HTML.

According to several website design software reviews, however, Dreamweaver beats out CoffeeCup when it comes to flexibility and growth for website designers. In other words, if you are looking to become a better, more advanced website designer then Dreamweaver will grow with you better than CoffeeCup.

Many users who reviewed both software programs scored Dreamweaver higher in usability and prefer it over CoffeeCup. Even if you are more advanced designer, you can type in your HTML code and work within that mode if you choose to design that way. Otherwise, for the beginner, there is a non-HTML interface that makes it easy to format and design your web pages.

Some users expressed frustration with CoffeeCup because of its non-standard file-open dialog. It does not behave like most other applications in this regard. Overall, CoffeeCup seems to be geared more toward beginners.

One area where CoffeeCup wins over Dreamweaver is its price tag. Dreamweaver is much more expensive, retailing for around \$399 at the time of this article being written. CoffeeCup has a much more modest price tag of about \$50. Bottom line, if you are just looking to design a web page every now and again and have little desire to advance your web design skills, then CoffeeCup may do. On the other hand, if you are looking for a better overall experience and something that can grow as you learn HTML, then choose Dreamweaver as your HTML editor.

Using Dreamweaver to Create your Site Layout

Having an easy and straight-forward website layout is key to achieving a great user experience. When users can navigate through your website with ease, they find the information they are looking for fast. When they have a positive experience with your site, they will return to it in the future and they are more likely to recommend that others do so as well. Dreamweaver makes it easy to organize your layout so that your users are happy and not confused as they browse through your site.

Plan Your Website Layout

Before you begin designing your website with Dreamweaver, it is a good idea to make a mock-up layout of your website somewhere else. Draw it out the old fashioned way on paper or use another program like Freehand or Fireworks to map it out. This will give you a foundation to use as you are designing different pages of your website.

It is also a good idea to gather and organize all of your images, logos, videos, and other media together before you begin the actual design in Dreamweaver. If you have other people designing these elements for you, then get them from that person before you begin designing. If you create them yourself, just make sure you have them all in one folder for quick access. This will make your design go much smoother as you will not have to stop each time to find an image.

Navigation & Search Features

Be sure to keep the same navigation features in the same place on each page of your website, as much as possible. Users will be pleased to know they can easily navigate between sections of your website while knowing where they are in relation to other pages.

Having a search or index also helps users feel comfortable with your site. If they are looking for something in particular, they always look for a search feature to find it quickly.

Style Sheets & Templates

Use CSS (cascading style sheets) within Dreamweaver to easily maintain the look and layout of your web pages.

With templates and libraries features, Dreamweaver allows you to recycle page layouts and page elements in different documents. You may have better success, though, by making new pages with templates and libraries as opposed to trying to apply those elements to existing pages. Then if you need to make changes to the layout or fonts, colors, etc., then you only need to make changes to that one template.

Templates were really designed to work with several users creating a website together. All users can design the same layout on different pages using templates. You may want to consider using libraries instead of templates if you are the only user; this may give you greater flexibility and freedom in your design.

Three Crucial Steps to Creating Your Website

Are you overwhelmed at how to begin creating your website? There are thousands of options when it comes to creating your website and it can be difficult to decide which step comes first. Here are three crucial steps that should not be overlooked:

Choose a Domain Name

Choosing a domain name is perhaps the most crucial step in website creation because this is what people will associate the most with your online business. Your web domain is the name of your online address. For example, “Google.com” is Google’s domain name.

Your domain name should be catchy and easy to remember, but perhaps more importantly it should automatically explain your business. It does not have to be the exact name of your business (in fact, sometimes that will not be an option if the domain name is already taken), although this is typically the best thing to do. So, choose a name that is similar to your business name, but has more to do with what you do than what your exact name is. If your organization’s name is self explanatory or if you have heavily branded your organization name, the best option may in fact be your exact organization name.

Subscribe to Web Hosting

Without web hosting service, your website will not be “live” on the internet. The web host uses a special computer that puts your website out there when people search for it. Your web hosting service does not have to be fancy. Think of it as a commuter car: it doesn’t have to be fancy - it just has to get you there. A good rule of thumb is if you don’t understand the options you’re being offered, then you don’t need them.

Build your Site

Once you have chosen a domain name and have a web host, you are ready to build your site. There are many ways to go about this step. You can hire a professional web designer to create it for you, you can do it yourself from scratch, or you can use a website builder. Each option has its benefits, it just depends on how much time and money you want to spend. Obviously, hiring a professional is going to cost you the most. Doing it yourself will probably take the most time. Using a website builder with templates and easy step-by-step instructions might give you the most basic look, but it will probably be the most efficient option. Many website builders are free.

Dos and Don’ts of Website Creation

There are so many factors that go into the success of your website. Most of them largely depend on what your goals are with your website. However, there are some general dos and don’ts of website creation that apply to almost every case. Here are some to help you:

DO create your website for your visitor, not for you. The idea is to please your visitor so that they stay on your site the longest and they come back again and again. If you design with only your goals in mind, you may lose their interest.

DON’T try to do everything all at once. Your goals may include getting your visitors to fill out a survey, buy a product, add your site to their social networking friends, and refer other people to your site. However, if you try to get too much from them too early, you may lose them. (For example, using a pop-up window on your home page might annoy your visitor and make them click back. Consider using sidebar space to ask them about their opinion.)

DO get their attention and keep it. The success of your site depends greatly on getting the attention of your visitors and getting them to stay on your website long enough for them to do whatever it is you want them to do. A good way to make sure this happens is to use catchy, easy-to-read headlines at the top of your page. Use breathtaking or shocking photos, but make sure they are not too large to avoid slow-loading pages.

DON'T scare them off. Using too many bright colors, a busy background, pop-up windows, blaring music, too much text, or other distractions and annoyances can turn off your visitors. Their first instinct when turned off is to vacate your website.

DO use a simple, up-to-date, eye-pleasing design. This is really key to making a great website. You can have the most crucial information on the planet and your visitors will not read it if your website is too complicated or ugly. People do judge books by their covers and they will pass judgment your website in a split second.

DON'T make your visitors work for what they want. Again, you need to design your website with THEM in mind. If they have to jump through hoops to get the information they want, they will not bother. There are probably hundreds of other websites that can give them the same information, so when they come to you make sure you are giving them what they want. When you do this you will leave a positive impression on them and they will remember your site next time they need something.

SEO Basics for Effective Website Design

SEO stands for Search Engine Optimization, which is the practice of designing your website in a way that is ideal for search engine scanning. When a search engine scours the Internet for matches on a keyword or phrase, there are many factors that go into its ranking system. The websites that rank highest will appear first in the search results. You want your website at the top of that list for the keywords your target audience is searching. Here are some tips to help you optimize your website for search engines:

Use keyword-rich content

In general, you want to use your keywords frequently in your content. Be careful not to overdo it though; you want your content to make sense. Do not write a sentence simply for the purpose of cramming a keyword in there.

Use keywords “high up” in your website

The more prominent the keyword, the better it will be picked up by search engine spiders. Having a keyword in your URL, your headlines, titles, article summaries, etc. will do great things for your page rank.

Use keywords “deep” in your website

Not only will it help you to use keywords on your homepage, it will also do your ranking justice to weave your keywords throughout many pages of your website.

Create links on keywords

Search engines give great weight to web pages that have links on keywords than to those that simply contain the keyword within the text.

Link to other pages within your site using keywords

The more your users click back and forth between pages of your site using keywords as those links, the higher your site will rank.

The more you use these practices, the better you will get at search engine optimization. SEO is a skill that comes with practice and it is constantly evolving as well. It is an online business practice that has just recently become unveiled. There are always new and exciting developments in SEO techniques. So keep researching to find new and better ways to optimize your website.

Ideas for Your Internet Business Website Design

Designing an internet business website is something you've always wanted to do. But what product or service can you promote online? There are endless ideas for creating an internet business website. Here are just a few to get your mind thinking...

Create Income from Your Hobby

Do you have a hobby? Are you an expert at something? Consider turning your expertise into income by creating an online business website promoting your skills. For example, if you are great at wood carving and have a bunch of beautiful pieces lying around the garage, why not sell them online!

Perhaps you have expertise in an area, but have no tangible product related to it. For example, you are a black belt in Karate. You have no tangible product to sell online, but you can promote your skills in martial arts. Perhaps you can create an ebook and promote it online. Offer up your expertise to others who may need your help. Once you gain a trusting and loyal following online, develop your ebook and sell it for profit. When people see you as an expert in your field, they will want to buy what you offer.

Offline Business Owners, Expand Online

If you are a business owner and are not already promoting your business online, now is the time to do it! Almost every business can be enhanced with a web presence. Consider creating an online storefront to sell your products; the internet allows you to reach many potential customers that you otherwise would have no way of marketing to.

If you're not ready to sell your services or goods online, you can always start with creating a simple blog about your industry. Develop a community of people who are interested in your industry and then consider launching your internet business website.

Inventors or Entrepreneurs

Maybe you are an inventor with an idea or a product that alone does not justify a traditional store. This is a perfect opportunity to make money from your invention. There are hundreds and thousands of websites which promote just one or two products. It is cost effective and easy to begin, which makes an internet business website a low risk way to try out your new invention in the marketplace.

For entrepreneurs, you may consider creating an affiliate marketing website. To do this, you choose an industry and a specific niche market. Seek out products and services that cater to that industry and ask them about their affiliate program. Once you determine which products you want to promote, design your website around that audience. Make your goal to drive traffic to your partners' websites and get paid from your partners for each lead or sale you provide them.

Immediately Applicable Design Tips for a User-Friendly Website

A user-friendly website is a successful website. Here are a few tips to get yours going:

Search Feature

Provide a search feature so your users can easily find what they're looking for. This is especially important for weblogs with archived articles. Archives are usually sorted by date, so having a search box saves your user time. Also consider categorizing your blog posts by topic instead of by date for this same reason.

Light vs. Dark Contrast

For your overall website design, it is best to use a light-colored background with dark text for the body of articles. Dark backgrounds and lighter text should be reserved for small feature boxes (i.e., sidebar features) or ads. White text on black background is eye catching, but nobody wants to read pages of it.

Consistent, Clear Navigation

Keep your navigation the same across all pages within your website. It should be clear to your users when they click a link whether they are being taken to another page within your site or if they are exiting your site altogether. (Also see below regarding link titles.)

Copy what Works

When in doubt concerning the design of your website, take a hint from your competition. Find someone who is successful in the same or similar industry as you and copy their design. This doesn't mean copy it exactly. If the structure and layout of their site makes sense, then use that as a foundation. Do not copy colors, fonts, and other signature or branding aspects. You want to stand out in the crowd. Once you've copied what works, then one-up the competition with better service, more eye-catching design, and richer content.

Contact, Help & Feedback

Your users should easily be able to access your contact information, your help desk, and easily give feedback. If there is a problem with your site or if the user has a question, they want help now. Consider using live chat help or giving your users a toll-free number to call for 24/7 support.

Faster Page Loading

Try to use smaller image files whenever possible. It will help your page load faster and will avoid turning off your visitor. (If users have to wait for your page to load, they will most likely click the back button and explore another website to find what they're looking for.) Also avoid slow-loading flash presentations before entering your site; although they are pretty, these too are offensive to your user.

Don't Annoy Your Users

Avoid pop-ups and other distracting annoyances that may turn visitors off of your page. It is annoying to find a page, start reading, and then get a window popping up in your face. Some businesses may use this tactic as a means to get users to fill out a form or buy a product, but if it offends the user they are not going to take the desired action anyway. Instead, consider creating an eye-catching box on your sidebar that asks them to fill out a form or that promotes a certain product. This is much less intrusive than a pop up window. Other annoyances to avoid include abrupt background music, flashing advertisements, ugly color schemes, and too much text.

Use Link Titles

Links titles are brief descriptions that pop up when the user scrolls over a link on your web page. It should clearly describe in a few words the page they will find themselves on if they were to click on that link. (Note: The text in the link itself should also be descriptive, but if it is within an article sometimes it is not enough to give the user an idea of where that link will take them. Use link titles to give them supplemental information for the page they will be viewing.)

Open In-Text Links in New Window

Design your website so that your in-text links open a new window instead of taking your users away from the page they are viewing. This way, it is easy for your user to follow that new link, get the information they need, and then click back to the original page when they are ready to

return. This avoids them having to click the “back” button several times to return to the article they were reading or the product page they were viewing.

6 Reasons to Create a Website

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of different kinds of websites out there on the World Wide Web. Think you don’t need one? Consider these scenarios:

I’m an established business owner with a small business in a small town

Creating an online storefront can boost your business by allowing your customers to view your product or read about your services before they visit your brick-and-mortar store. It can also be a means for your business to grow outside of your local area.

I’m a person who wants his voice heard, but doesn’t have the means to campaign for change

Create a blog or social networking site and speak to the world! Use online tools to drive traffic to your site, campaign for change, or simply write an online diary of your deepest thoughts.

It’s been years since I’ve seen some of my closest friends from school. I wish I could find them and just catch up

Use the Internet to pick a social networking site (or several) that meet your needs. Create your own page (or “profile”) and begin searching for your old classmates. Update your page often with content and photos so they know what is going on in your life.

I’m an entrepreneur who wants a fast and low-cost way to start my business

The Internet is perhaps the least costly way to launch a business in the world today. Go online to research some website creation and design tools that are free or very low cost. Get the advice you need to market your new business online as well.

I’m a stay-at-home mom who wants to contribute to my household financially, but I don’t want to leave my kids at childcare while I work at a traditional job

Many moms and dads alike are discovering the power of telecommuting. Create a career profile of yourself on a social networking site that highlights your skills. Or design your own website and give your web address out to potential employers. Better yet, create your own online business and work from home to create supplemental income for your family.

My husband and I started a non-profit but we have had little luck getting the resources we need to make it work

Create your website online and use it as an informational tool. Make others aware of your cause and the need for funding, lobby for funds, and find volunteers all via the Web.

Common Website Design Mistakes

Here are some common mistakes that beginners make when designing their websites:

Getting ahead of the game

Many people get so excited about the design part of their website that they don't take the necessary preparation to make a truly effective website. Design should only take place after you've defined your goals, done your market research (for business websites), chosen a domain name, and found a web hosting service.

Going crazy with color

It's great fun to experiment with color and patterns, but it's important to know what works the best for your website goals. If the purpose of your website is anything other than for your own pure enjoyment, then you want other people to like your design. Therefore, it really doesn't matter what you think looks good as long as the design works to appeal to your users.

Overlooking the planning stage

A lot of beginning website designers go straight to the design of individual web pages with nothing but a picture in their heads of what their website will look like. It is important, though, to plan out the structure and layout of your website before you dive in. Having a plan on paper will make your design process much easier.

Making a template after you've begun designing individual pages

If you design a bunch of web pages first, it could be a lot of trouble to go back later to change a design element in each page. Try creating a CSS template to achieve a consistent look throughout your entire website, then begin designing each page.

Design is too complex

Your website will not appeal to your users unless it is simple and straight-forward. Especially when you are just beginning in web design, don't try to do everything at once. Make a simple foundation for your website and you can always add bells and whistles later.

Failing to test everything

Most people assume that design is largely a personal preference thing, and it is. But that doesn't mean that you just choose whatever design looks good to you and leave it at that. Keep your audience in mind when you're designing your initial website. Once you've collected data for a significant period of time, then go ahead and test certain design elements. Change one thing at a time and track your results for everything. Go with what the numbers tell you what works.

Too Much or Too Little

When creating a successful website, you must always keep in mind what your visitor wants. Keeping them happy and entertained is going to determine how much text to put on your website. Here are some general rules of thumb for the amount of text for your type of website:

The Information-Packed Website

If information is what your customer has come seeking, (i.e. a blog, a how-to site, etc.) then that's what you give them. However, this does not mean that you need a great deal of text on the home page of your website. You can provide a great deal of information without scaring off your visitor with a thesis-length welcome statement.

Offer them information, little by little. Create headlines and short paragraphs on your home page that give them a taste of the information they're looking for. Tease them. Include a link to read more at the bottom of your paragraph. If they truly want more, they can click and read the entire article on that topic. This is good for search engine optimization as well, if you do it correctly and link using your target keywords. Generally, the deeper your visitors go into your website, the more they are interested, and the high ranking your website will achieve with the search engines.

The Store

If your website is your online store, then you need to be careful about how much and how little text you display. Give your customers a few sentences at a time. Think of it as a magazine that sits on a shelf at the checkout stand. Your visitor will pick it up and thumb through it, and possibly purchase it, if your cover is designed correctly. If there is too much text on your cover (i.e., your homepage) then you will lose a potential sale. Pictures are a must for selling most tangible – and even many tangible – items. Use a balance of eye-catching pictures and clever, descriptive text for your online store website.

The Social Networking Site

When trying to determine how much text to put on your social networking site, compare it to an email forward: If you open the forwarded email and begin reading, it is at that point that stop and think to yourself, "I don't care what the punch line is; I've wasted too many seconds of my life reading this email." Whatever the amount of text you've read at that exact breaking point is about three times the ideal amount for your social networking site. Hint: People visit your social networking site to do three things. First, to be amused. Second, to catch up with your latest life happenings. Third, to check out what you have to offer (if you are a business or organization). You must keep their attention for each of these purposes.

When in Doubt, Test

If you're unsure as to what is too much or too little text for your website, then test it. Create two versions of the same page with the same purpose, one with lengthy text and one with shorter text. Track your results to see which one outperforms the other.

Why Successful Website Development Does Not Stop at Design

Designing your website is a process in and of itself. Once you have a real, live website, you may feel as though you can sit back and watch the traffic come in. Wrong. There is a lot involved in actually getting your website to function as an effective selling tool for your business.

Marketing

Like any other part of your business, you must market your website. You have to get the word out there in order for people to be aware of your website. Then, you must give them a reason to visit your website. What do you have to offer? Is your product going to solve a problem for them? How are you different than your competition? Like your brick and mortar business, you must get people in the door before you can sell anything.

There are hundreds of ways to market your online business; online marketing is a topic that is ever changing and evolving. Just a few examples include Google Adwords, banner ads, affiliate marketing, enewsletters, ebooks, ezines and articles, and social networking sites. You can even market your online business using offline methods. Choose the methods that make the most sense for your business.

Tracking

Regardless of which methods you choose to market your online business, it is absolutely crucial to track your marketing. Without a clear picture of what is happening in your business, you will not be able to determine what is bringing the most leads and which leads actually produce the highest profits for your business. Luckily, online marketing is fairly automatic when it comes to tracking. You just have to make sure you use a good tracking method that you can use to easily make sense of your results.

Testing

What do you do with the results of your tracking? The next step is to test your marketing. Drop what doesn't work or tweak it to see what does work. If one method isn't working, consider a different channel. Remember to give your online marketing enough time to test each version of an ad. Also, remember that quantity (or amount of traffic) is not the entire picture. Just because a certain marketing method drives a great deal of traffic to your site does not necessarily mean that the traffic is profit generating. Be sure to test your marketing with your final ROI in mind.

Repeat

To grow your business, marketing must be constant and repetitive. Remember that sending out one email blast will not do justice to your business. Marketing is all about consistency and performance. Repeat that which performs and stop doing (or test differently) that which does not perform.

Ideas for Your Personal Website Design

Discover more about your family and connect with relatives you may have never contacted. Design a website focused around your family tree and see how many pieces of the puzzle you can find and put together. There are some great sites out there that can help you with this. Do a search for “family tree” and you will find a few good places to start.

Do you have a passion for your **hobby**? Whether it is quilting or backyard railroading, waterskiing or rock climbing, you can showcase your experience and find others who share your interest online. Creating a hobby website is fun and can help you appreciate your interest even more by finding out how many others share your love. You can even set up your site to include tutorials and tips for novices who are just beginning with your hobby.

Your website can also be a fun tool for your **family** to stay connected. Create a website with photo albums, a family tree, a kids section, family reunion calendar, and more. It's up to you how little or how much you want to put on your website. Encourage other family members to make their website as well or to offer up photos and stories that you can post on your website.

Create a **non-profit** website. You can even get a website with the .org suffix to show all of your visitors that you represent a non-profit organization. This is a great way to volunteer and help out with a favorite local organization or charity. You don't have to travel to help out with your favorite charity – you can design a website right from your home office. Post helpful information to give others a chance to get involved. Spread the word and see how many visitors you can get to support your cause. You can even start a fundraising effort online.

Use your website to **teach** in an area you have expertise. The Internet can be a wonderful and convenient learning tool for all ages. Even kids as young as three years old are exhibiting better computer skills than some adults! With information right at their fingertips, students of all ages are looking to the Internet to learn more about all different topics. Your website can be their avenue to gaining better knowledge in your field.

How to Create a Social Networking Website to Enhance your Business

Ask any business owner and they will tell you: the latest method for generating new and repeat business is social networking. If you're not already leveraging the power of social networking site for your business, here is how to get started:

Find where your target audience “hangs out” online

Just as you would find your audience in any other media, there are social networking sites that are more popular with certain groups of people. Find which sites are the most popular with your audience and make a priority list of which sites to create first.

Decide on your message

What do you want to tell your audience? Why are you creating a social networking site? Is it to promote a product or make them aware of an issue? Are you trying to establish a connection with your existing customers? Clarify your goals before you begin creating your site.

Now you are ready to begin building your website

The first and most obvious step is to **create your profile**. Include pictures of yourself and/or your staff members, your product, customers with testimonials (with their permission), anything that might help describe your business.

Make it as personal as possible

People use social networking websites to bridge that gap between technology and people. So, wherever you can make your website more personal, you will see more success.

Start posting

Post comments and updates on your website regularly. You never want people to think you have stopped maintaining your site, so frequent updates are crucial. Social networking is all about keeping people informed of the latest news about your business. You don't have to always talk about your product, in fact it's better that you don't. People aren't coming to your site to be sold; they come seeking information and perhaps entertainment. Give them additional information about your industry, how-to articles, latest news and related services.

Announce yourself

Make it known that you are a part of the network. Find people to connect with online. Social networking sites make it easy to join communities, search for specific individuals, and connect with different types of people. Just do a search and start commenting on others' posts. Find friends of friends and encourage your existing readers to refer their friends to you.

Recommend other businesses

that may help your readers get more of what they want. When you endorse others, they will endorse you. Don't be shy about reaching out to other business owners to create mutually beneficial partnerships.

Tips for Designing an Affiliate Website

If you are an aspiring affiliate marketer, designing your website is probably going to be the most difficult part of the process for you. Most affiliates are business-minded and not so technical savvy, but design doesn't have to be a struggle for you. You could hire someone to design the website, but this can get quite expensive. Even if you choose to hire a professional for the initial creation of your site, you will probably want to learn the HTML codes for your affiliate products

so you can make small adjustments yourself. In the long run, it will get very costly to call on a professional to do every little design change for you. So, here are some basic design tips to help get your affiliate website up and to keep it working:

Focus on Your Niche

You already know this, but let's reiterate. A lot of affiliate marketers are unsuccessful because they do not implement this step correctly. You must find a niche and create your website specifically for that audience. Choose affiliate products that solve a problem for your audience. Determine all of this BEFORE you design your site. (It is difficult to solve a problem without first knowing what that problem is.)

Don't Get Caught Up in the Design, Just Get the Job Done

Once you get comfortable designing, it can be quite fun. It's easy to get carried away with fonts and colors, but what really matters is getting the job done. These design elements are important, but if you have nothing to base your decisions on then don't waste time at this stage of the game. Just pick something now, get your site up and running, and test for design elements later.

Choose Simple Software

Consider using a website builder from your web hosting company. They will often offer this for free as part of your hosting package. Their software is usually very basic, (after all it is free), so you don't get all the bells and whistles. But you don't know how to code all the bells and whistles anyway, so don't worry about it. Again, just get the job done and you can tweak/test it later.

Test It

That brings us to testing. Testing is absolutely crucial to your long-term affiliate marketing success. You need to know what works for which niche markets and which products. You need to change certain design aspects and test them to see what works better. Some don't consider testing a part of website design, but the reality is that you will need to deal with the layout and format of your website (which is part of design) in order to run most of your tests. So, become familiar with design basics and you will find you have less frustration in the long run.

How to Use Wordpress for your Website

Wordpress is publishing software that was created to make the publishing experience more user-friendly for the authors of websites. It is open-source software that focuses on ease-of-use, fast uploading and posting features, and a straight-forward experience. Although Wordpress is great software that is easy to use, it is not for everyone. Wordpress is great for blogging, but may not be necessary for your website. If you are sure that you want to try Wordpress, then read on to see how to apply it for your website.

The first step is to install the Wordpress software on your web server. You can also install it on your home and/or office computers or an intranet. Wordpress gives you full control over your website content so you do not have to worry about going through a third party to make modifications to your site.

Create different levels of accessibility to your backend for different team members. For instance, give your content writer the ability to post new blog updates, but restrict their access to other features they won't need.

Next, create different user profiles for each author on your blog. Control what contact information is displayed for each user.

You can use templates to make fast changes to web pages within your site. Wordpress allows you to update any part of your weblog without having to generate new pages each time.

Allow your users to subscribe to different sections of your weblog. Readers will not necessarily want to read all of your posts, but they may be interested in one category that you write about every so often. When you set up your site with different categories for your readers, they have the option to subscribe only to the categories they in which they are interested. This gives you greater opportunities for increased - and more loyal - readership.

Post to your site often using Wordpress. The software was specifically designed to make your job fast and easy, so take advantage of it. When you update your site frequently, your readers know that you are still actively involved in the site and they will want to hear the latest news.

Maintain your site with photos, videos, and other media that will make your site visually appealing to you readers. Use video to demonstrate certain visual aspects of your topic or to show your face to your readers to make it a more personal experience. Use audio clips and link to other websites to give your readers a rich experience.

Top 14 Reasons to Create a Blog

Have you ever wondered why people are so into blogging these days? Blogosphere cites the average number of blog posts in a 24 hour period as being 900,000. Perhaps even more impressive, 81 languages are represented in those posts. Wow! It may not be that apparent if you're not a blogger yourself, but there are plenty of reasons why blogging has become so incredibly popular in today's online culture. Money, fame, cathartic release... do YOU need a reason to become a blogger? Try these out:

1. **Report** – Some blogs have become respected sources to get daily news and projections from trusted people.
2. **Self-Promote** – Let employers know you are a skilled worker looking for a job or promote your services.
3. **Share** – Create a blog to share photos, videos, thoughts, whatever you find amusing.

4. **Profit** – Make a great blog in a niche market and sell advertising to make a nice full-time or part-time income.
5. **Persuade** – Many bloggers write with the intention of influencing others whether it be politically or otherwise.
6. **Enjoy a Pastime** – Become a part of a community of people who like to spend their time doing what you do.
7. **Connect** – You can read your family and friends’ blogs and they can read yours. Stay tuned into each others lives in a busy world, and without paying long distance charges.
8. **Voice** – Some people start blogs with the intention of getting their voice heard. Discuss major or minor topics with your audience.
9. **Express** – Perhaps more than anything, the Internet is somewhere you can vent and feel like the entire world can hear you... but you don’t have to be “seen” doing it, unless you want to.
10. **Endorse** – Start a blog for your business. All you have to do is find something people want to write and read about that relates to your business. Display your own ads on your blog or lose the subtlety and openly endorse your product within your blog.
11. **Lend a Hand** – Write about a topic to help others understand, do it themselves or get a question answered.
12. **Sell** – Many blogs are all about selling a product or service. There are subtle and not-so-subtle ways to sell in your blog.
13. **Dish** – Some blogs don’t make sense at all. Some bloggers just want to get their opinion out or tell a funny story. You can too.
14. **Explore** – Since you’re new to blogging it can be a great way to explore the variety in this world without leaving your desk.

Tips for Designing a Successful Blog

Blogs may seem fairly straight forward, and they are compared to other types of websites. However, there are some tricks of the trade that will help make your blog a successful one rather than one nobody wants to read. Try these tips for designing a successful blog:

Focus your Content

To promote recurring readership, pick a specific topic to write on. Avoid writing about several different topics on your blog. People will go to your site to read an article on their topic, but they will return if they know you have others on that topic.

Post Regularly

Too many bloggers create a blog, make a few starting posts, and then don't update their blog for weeks or even months. It's like you can see when their excitement tapers off. People may land on your page if those first few posts are caught by their search, but they will not return if there is no indication that you update your blog. People want useful, recent and accurate information.

Use Smart Linking Techniques

As you create content for your blog, keep in mind how the search engines will be scanning for your topic. Use solid SEO (search engine optimization) practices to ensure your articles are being found. Also, be sure to link to other articles in your archives so that people get the information they need on a certain topic without having to search by date. (They don't necessarily know when you've posted on that topic.) Also, use link titles to show the reader where the link is going. Readers won't click on something unless they are convinced it will help them get more of the information they seek. Just by hovering over the link, a link title gives a brief explanation of what they would find on the next page if they were to click.

Write Descriptive Headlines

Another way to use solid SEO practices is to make your headlines very descriptive. Avoid too lengthy headlines and titles, but be as descriptive as possible using a few words. Cryptic titles do not tell the reader what the article is about and they do nothing for your search engine optimization efforts.

Use Slang Only When Readers Want You To

Using slang for a certain niche is good to a certain extent. For example, if you are writing for an advanced group, you don't want to bore them by dumbing it down to layman's terms. However, you don't want to ostracize new readers. Explain terminology as much as makes sense in your blog. At the very least, create links on key terms that will guide a new reader to the definition of that term.

More Tips for Designing a Successful Blog

There are so many factors that go into designing a successful blog and we wanted to share more with you! The more you know, the more you can put to use on your own blog. So here are some more tips for designing a successful blog:

Put Yourself Out There

Include a biography on yourself, give them some background information and include a photo. Give them as much information as you can so they feel like they are connecting with you, the author. Making that connection with your readers increases the likelihood that they will come back to your site again and again.

Be Professional

Even if you are writing just for your friends and family, the information you provide on the Internet gets archived and saved. Make sure you are putting forth the image you want people to see – including your professional contacts, like future employers. A good rule of thumb to blog by: if you think you may regret it in ten years, then don't post it. Or, if you think a future boss would disapprove, then don't post it.

Be Personable

Write on your blog in a conversational writing style to create a dialogue with your readers. They will become engaged when they feel like they are conversing with a real person as opposed to just reading an article, like in a magazine. You will find more readers commenting and making posts on your blog. In turn, you will create more loyal readers and a community of bloggers on your topic.

Use Author Bios

In addition to introducing yourself to your readers, be sure to let them know information about any other authors that post to your blog. People want to know who they are dealing with.

Use Media Wisely

Using different forms of media on your blog is a great way to create interest. However, posting only videos or audio clips does little for your content in terms of search engine optimization. So, post media every once in a while to give your readers an enriched experience and keep them entertained. Make sure you have lots of good textual content on your blog as well.

Create Excitement

People may go to your site to get information, but they will stay if they are entertained. Give useful information in entertaining ways that captivate your readers. Give them teasers on what is to come in your upcoming posts. Give them a reason to come back to check out your blog.