



What's New

How to Make Sure Your Website Works for You

If this hasn't happened to you, it most likely has happened to some company you know. You are halfway through the design and development of your new website and it's not what you want. Or the finished project comes in over way over budget and late. How much of this is the failure of the web firm will depend on its level of experience and knowing how to ask the right questions. But even the most qualified firm can only work with the information they get from you. If you don't know what you want or what your site needs to achieve, expect delays and possibly additional cost.

Designing and building a website is not unlike designing and building a house. You need a blueprint and that comes from a comprehensive process that includes a discovery phase during which time your firm learns as much as it can about your business, competition, culture, brand, etc, and then works with you to define objectives. Once these are agreed upon, design, development and the implementation of the site follow.

You can facilitate the blueprint, and in turn influence the success of the project, by taking the time to develop a request for a proposal (RFP). This is a comprehensive document that outlines what you want a firm to provide relative to your project, in this case you Web design or redesign.

Putting together the RFP will help you get to the heart of what your organization wants to accomplish and keep the project on time and on budget. Pulling the RFP together also requires getting your team on board with a common vision so that you can sort out conflicts before you walk through the agency's door and not during the design, development and implementation process.

To be complete, your RFP needs to address your objectives, your competitive environment, how you want your site to look and convey your brand and positioning and above all what you want your visitors to do when they arrive at your site. For example, will your customers need to fill out a form, review products, complete a survey? Will certain areas be exclusive to select customers or partners and so require password protection? Does the site require e-commerce, transactions or a product catalog?

You also want to consider how the site will be managed or updated. If you plan to do your own updates, then you will need a content management system (CMS) that will enable you do this. Many new open source CMS systems, such as Drupal, enable non technical staff to handle updates to your site or add features, which can be a real time and money saver down the road.

The answers to these questions also will help you and the agency determine what if any special applications and tools the site needs. Don't be misguided by another site you like but whose objectives in no way map to yours. No two companies even in the same market have the same exact needs. Consider two financial services companies. One may need a site to reach unsophisticated users who need to understand how to trade stocks; another firm's customers may be experienced traders who trade every day. Same market - different needs, therefore different sites.

As the project gets underway, you also will want to provide your agency with a single point of contact to help dig out information from internal sources, make decisions and most important help keep the project meeting key deadlines.

Finally, set metrics to measure success. If increased sales are the goal, then make sure your agency understands that and designs a site that makes purchasing easy and seamless. If your site is strictly informational, make sure the content is readable and the flow is easy. If your site is hard to navigate, your readers will come and go quickly.

All said, a successful and smooth Web design project depends a lot on you. Think of your own customers and how much easier things go when they know what they want. Be like them!

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