

Website Road Map to Success: User-Centered Design Approach

Planning

Before your first web page is created or redesigned you should consider the following questions:

- **Why are you developing a website?** While this may seem like an obvious question it is one that is all too often neglected. This is an important question to ask, as it will help you to shape your content and measure your success.

There are many reasons to develop a website. If you are a business, you may have a product or service you wish to market. In the case of a Chesapeake Bay Gateways site your motivation may be to increase travel to your site or even to sell your products.

- **What are your goals and objectives?** Deciding why you are developing or redeveloping a website should help you determine your goals (e.g. educate, inform, attract visitors, entertain, sales, etc.). Your goals determine your audience, content, function, and the site's look and feel.

You should develop specific and measurable goals to help you quantify success.

- **Who will use your site?** Knowing who your users are helps you efficiently address their needs. After all your website will exist solely to serve the users - without the users you would not require a site. It is important to realize that your users may not always be who you think they are.

If you have an existing website an analysis of the log files may shed some light on the composition of your users. You may find that you have several types of users (k-12 student, college students, general public, etc.). Creating user profiles or personas may help you to identify the needs of your users.

- **What tasks do your users need to accomplish?** Different types of users will likely visit your site for various reasons. Think of the tasks that various users might want to accomplish on your site, this will ensure that your site is user centered.

Technology

Once you have determined the purpose, goals and user needs you will be ready to begin thinking about the technological needs of your site.

- **What are technology requirements?** Websites can be quite simply in nature or very complex. To determine the technological needs of your website it is important to know your goals, objectives and user needs. Working with a web professional you can determine what technologies will be needed to make your website a reality.
- **Avoid using “bleeding edge technologies”.** The term “bleeding edge technology” is used to describe the latest, often unproven technology. While the latest technologies may offer solutions to problems you have encountered, using unproven and new technologies is not recommended.

It is important to remember that while you may have cutting edge equipment and a super high speed Internet connection your typical user may not.

Content

The most important aspect of your website is the content. The content of your site is what will attract visitors and ensures return visits.

- **Keep content fresh.** Since content is the most important aspect of your website it is necessary to keep it fresh if you wish to generate return visits.
- **Spelling and grammar are important.** Mistakes in spelling or grammar degrade the credibility of your website.
- **The web is different type of media and requires different approach.** While a website may share many similarities with other types of media (TV, radio, and print) it is unique and requires a unique approach to optimize its effectiveness.
- **Use interactive content** (games, puzzles and contests). Interactive content engages the user with the site and increases the likelihood of return visits.

- **Follow writing for the web guidelines.** Did you know that people read 25-50% slower from a computer screen than they do paper? In order to be effective text for the web should be concise, scannable, accurate and use objective language.

Usability/Accessibility

Websites are designed to be used and therefore should be easy to use. Your website user's needs should be at the center of your web strategy.

- **Know the attributes of a usable site.** A usable site should be easy to learn, efficient to use, easy to remember, and satisfying to user.
- **Conduct user test on your site early and often.** You can begin user testing your website even before the first web page is coded by using methods such as paper prototyping.

Following an iterative design process can help address usability problems before a final product is launched.

- **Follow a user-centered design approach.** Users are the reason your site exists. Your site should focus on the user's needs not the organization's structure.
- **Accessibility means reaching more people in more situations.** While many in the web design community mistakenly assume that accessibility issues only affect disabled users this is not the case. Users can have functional and/or situation limitations that affect their ability to use your website. Having a site that is accessible to all users increases your potential user base.

Design

While content is the most important aspect of your website it is the design that facilitates the ability of users to access the content. A successfully designed website is able to get users quickly and efficiently to the content that they seek.

- **Efficient and consistent navigation.** Navigation is the most critical design element when developing a website. Navigation should be easy to use and consistent across your site.

- **Consistent look and feel.** Many websites in the early days of the Internet had a different look and feel to virtually every page. This not only makes the site seem non-cohesive but can hinder the user experience.
- **Web has potential to be great equalizer.** Whether a small organization or large, the web gives you the same ability to reach the same audience.
- **Graphics should be simple and meaningful.** Although many users now have high-speed broadband Internet connections many still connect through low speed modem connections. Graphics can greatly increase page download times and affect user satisfaction.

Marketing

- **Choosing a proper domain name.** Your domain name is often the first contact a user will have with your site. Domain names should be short and meaningful. Your URL should be no more than 75 characters.
- **Monitor and evaluate your site.** It is important to continually evaluate your site in terms of your goals. Are you reaching your target audience? Is your site easy to use?
- **Is your site ready for search engines?** In order to be successful users must be able to find your site. Making sure your site has what it takes to be listed in major search engines is a must.
- **Arrange reciprocal links.** Are there other sites that might want to link to your site, perhaps state travel, chamber of commerce or tourism sites? This can potentially increase traffic to your site.
- **Put your web address on everything.** Include your URL in stationary, business cards, brochures, invoices and all company literature.
- **Create an e-mail mailing list.** Publish an e-mail newsletter with links to your site. This is a great way to communicate with those whom have expressed an interest in your organization.

- **Add URL to signature line of employee e-mail.** Another simple way to spread your URL.
- **Conduct contest tied to the website.** This is a great way to engage your user and encourage them to return to your site.
- **Advertise your site on TV and radio.** Use other forms of media to promote your website. Include the website URL in all press releases.

Quick Tips

Things to Do:

- Make sure your pages load quickly.
- Provide an effective site search engine.
- Provide a site map.
- Respond to all visitor feedback and questions.
- Do include prices if you have products on your site.
- Include a privacy policy on your website.
- Use high contrast color schemes.
- Do use standard link colors.

Things NOT to Do:

- No splash page!
- No scrolling or blinking text.
- No visible hit counters.
- Only use animation if it is information rich.
- No "Under Construction Signs".
- Avoid use of frames.
- Avoid long scrolling pages.
- Don't let your content become outdated.