

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT MASTER CLASS SERIES

Internet Web Development Master Class: New Sites

A few years ago the Internet was heralded as a major break-through in marketing communications. We were told in no uncertain terms that society would change forever and that every home would be plugged into the web. However, in the cold light of dawn following the burst of the 'dot-com' bubble there was a subtle downshift of expectations. Now with a billion or so pages comprising the Internet your proposed site will be a very small fish in a very, very big pond...

Keeping in control

Before undertaking your Internet development project stop, think and plan! Ideally you should have a strategy, cost justification and project plan in place prior to proceeding. Aesthetic, technical as well as business requirements should be specified from the outset to prevent the development from spiralling out of control.

Your Internet presence should be formally managed: just as you would with any other business or Information Technology project. This does not mean telling a technical team that you want to get a web site and leaving them to it (unless you like writing blank cheques). Assign the responsibility for managing the project to someone that primarily understands your business and your business environment. If they also understand the technical side of things that would be a bonus.

When putting together a development team remember that what you are developing is an Information Technology system. Your Internet development team should be subject to the same development controls that you would reasonably expect from a team developing your key management reporting systems. How impressed would you be with a site that crashes repeatedly because no-one could be bothered to do any formal testing?

The reverse of this is the excessive application of development controls. One common error is to try and make the site 100% compatible with every browser type, every platform and every version of every browser. The reality is that the vast proportion of Internet users access the Internet using one of three browsers e.g. Internet Explorer, Netscape and AOL. You may not like the fact but it is none the less reality. If you really want 100% compatibility you will pay for it in terms of time, money and loss of functionality.

Setting the foundations

So, you've developed your strategy, hired a development team and put in place the technical controls to manage the process. Fantastic! You are now ready for what is sometimes a pre-destined internal struggle for control and ownership. Your next challenge is to resolve who owns what and who has overall control. Is it an IT system that should be managed by your systems development department? Or should it be owned by marketing because it conveys marketing messages? Or is it a sales tool that is the responsibility of Sales? Or is it owned by the entire company with technical, marketing and sales inputs?

If there is a correct answer it is probably that Marketing need to have overall control because websites in the main exist to market products and services before they do anything else. Even if you do opt for a different permutation if you don't have the buy-in from marketing you don't have a site.

Having resolved the ownership infighting you need to focus back onto a few technical foundations. You need somewhere to put your site and for most of us this means entering into a contract with an ISP - Internet Service Provider. Your site is only as good as your ISP therefore you should choose carefully and think 'long term'.

When it comes to ISPs you generally get what you pay for. Cheap / free ISPs will probably deliver slow servers, poor reliability and few eCommerce capabilities. If your long term objective is to have a database driven eCommerce site it is wise to ensure that your ISP can support your long term plans from the outset.

If you can try to negotiate a contract that allows you to place your site with any ISP without affecting your domain name i.e. www.abc.com otherwise you could be locking yourself into a contract with one host for life. Your domain should be fully under your control and not the property of your ISP.

Also consider where your ISP's servers are. If the servers are based in the US that's great – but only if the majority of your visitors are going to be browsing from the US. A server based in the US means that your web page (which is actually broken up into hundreds of small packets which are reassembled by the system that requested them) will be passed through a confusing array of servers / routers / switches before getting to the UK. This takes time. The greater the distance the greater the time for pages to load and more annoyed your visitors will become.

Once you have somewhere to put your site and an appropriate domain name you're ready to embark what has become a very predictable evolutionary lifecycle...

Tip: Even if you know what to expect and what to avoid you will probably still make the same mistakes as everyone else and moreover you will probably make those same mistakes in the same order!

Evolutionary stages

Most sites tend to go through an evolutionary stage that involves having too many images and visual effects such as popup windows or Flash animations. From a design perspective they may well have a high 'cool' rating, but think for a moment about the end user – your customer in the making. They do not appreciate hanging around waiting for hundreds of images to load, they kill popup windows on sight and instantly go into finger tapping mode if you force them watch your nice animated presentation before accessing the site.

Tip: Your visitors are there to get information; your site should be there to give them that information – quickly. Value their time as much as your value yours.

The image heavy phase tends to be followed by an information 'lite' phase. Your visitors may love the design but what's the point if you're not telling them about your products or giving them an opportunity to make an order? If you're not sure what people want why not try asking them? Just because you're developing a web site does not mean that you are excused from doing conventional market research.

Tip: Ask them what they want from the site and then give them what they're looking for in such a way that they can find it quickly and easily.

It is typically at this juncture that the information overload phase starts. Content starts pouring in (often from brochures) and the web developers faithfully replicate everything that they're given. Pretty soon your site looks like an overfilled brochure cupboard with every page oozing with information. Therein lies the problem – people can't process that volume of information and don't like pages that scroll forever. They experience 'bark burn' – the trees are so close together that they burn their noses on the bark. A web site is not a brochure cupboard.

Tip: Keep it 'lite' but not too 'lite'. If in doubt - summarise, summarise, summarise.

It is during the summarisation phase that the next issue comes to the fore – too many layers and links. It can be tempting to break brochure-like pages into smaller chunks and to simply distribute essentially the same volume of information over a greater number of pages. This approach is actually worse than simple information overload – at least with brochure-ware pages users can print off the content in one hit. By spreading the content over multiple pages you're forcing the user to do the one thing they hate doing – 'clicking'. Clicking through a multi layered site can totally confuse even the most determined user unless you make the route that they've taken blatantly obvious. Links within the content of pages simply make the problem worse by diverting attention away from the page being viewed.

Tip: Keep the navigation simple, tell people where they've been, avoid too many links and if you must use links within text open a new window in such a way that it is obvious that a new window has been opened.

Getting noticed (very, very briefly)

There may be a billion pages on the Internet but only around 1% of them every get anywhere near a search engine's database. In some respects this is a good thing because it means that when we search for something we are not overwhelmed (more than we are already) by too many results. In other respects it is a bad thing if you expect your search to return an accurate picture of what is out there on the web.

From a technical perspective getting noticed by search engines (more specifically by spiders and robots that generate the databases used by search engines) is something that starts from day 0 of the development and should continue for the lifetime of the site.

Without going into too much detail (this can be a complex topic) hidden tags at the top of pages (title / keywords / description / ...), links to your site from other sites, links from your site to other sites, your domain name, image / file names, headings and last but not least the content of the page itself are all used by search engines (in different ways) to generate brief summaries of your web pages. These summaries are generated by 'robots' and 'spiders' that index the Internet on behalf of search engines. Very importantly robots and spiders do what they do infrequently.

To get them to take a look at your site you need to either pay the search engine provider or if you have time to spare you could request that they index your site for free. These types of request are called submissions. You are making a request for the spiders / robots to index your site – notably it is a request only. No matter how much money you pay there are no guarantees. To make life interesting there are a number of ways to annoy the robots / spiders to such an extent that they in effect ban your site and will not return. Search directories do not use robots and spiders – their content is generally evaluated by human beings. Whether submitting to a search engine or a directory it is therefore very important to only submit your site when the site is in a fit state to be indexed / reviewed.

There are a wide variety of search engines out there but only a few with real presence in the marketplace – the most important for most sites being Google and Yahoo.

Keeping it up (very, very briefly)

Once your site is up and running, not annoying the people that are trying to use it and present in search engine databases it can be tempting to relax and take it easy for a while. Tempting perhaps, but highly unwise.

You need to keep the content fresh; update things when they change; ensure that applications are up and running; adapt to changes implemented when new versions of the key browsers are released; correct broken links (especially if you link to other sites that are not in your control); fix errors; periodically redesign the look and feel of the whole site to reflect current user expectations – in short you need to maintain your presence and keep on top of the routine chores. If you do not your visitors may look elsewhere and find a site that does.

Measuring Success (very, very briefly)

One of the last things to be considered when developing web sites is often how frequently the site is being used, who is using the site and what the conversion rate is in terms of visitors to leads to sales to repeat visits and repeat business. One partial solution is to analyse your web logs (if you can't access them you're with the wrong ISP).

Web logs can tell you in very rough terms how much activity there has been and with persistence you can get a feel for how people are navigating through the site. Before starting any form of analysis you may wish to remove hits from your own staff, spider / robot activity and probably images. This leaves you with what PC / server accessed what page and what page they came from to get to the current page. To get a more detailed view you will need to get users to log into your site so that you can track them as people.

Also, when trying to tangibly measure the success of your site it is worth remembering one of the fundamental rules of business: materiality – if it isn't worth the cost of measuring don't measure it. You should minimally be able to identify the overall number of page hits, how many unique PCs / servers those hits represent, how many leads could be directly attributed to the site and of these leads how many were converted into sales.

The bigger picture

In this master class we've taken an accelerated tour of what to expect when you decide to web enable your business. You have been forewarned of the pitfalls but the likelihood is that you will make the same mistakes as the rest of us.

In the next master class we will take an equally rapid tour of how to further evolve your web presence and how to integrate your web presence with your sales and marketing strategies.

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