Loose Ends

Turn Chaos into ORDER

Web Mania

Planning to launch a web site this year? Have a site but feel it's become stale? Just got connected? Whatever your experience or INexperience level, webmania may have you in its grip. Here's a guide to designing, redesigning or just exploring the world of the web.

Perusing

If you're completely inexperienced, it's time to take an online field trip. Even if you're at home on the web, this assignment will better prepare you to discuss what you're looking for once you select a web developer. Cruising aimlessly around the web may seem like a waste of valuable time, but it's one of the best ways to see what you like and what you don't like. Make notes on colors, graphics, special features and just the look and feel of what you find. Definitely use this time to check out your competitors' sites!

Purpose of Site

The purpose and intended audience of any site should be clear upon close inspection. Consider your goals in creating your site. These usually fall into one of the following categories:

- ecommerce
- informational
- resume/portfolio
- just for fun (family tree, birth of child, wedding, etc.)

Presentation

The impact your site makes is created via its visual presentation. This includes such details as: color, layout, navigation scheme, amount and type of information, use of databases and/or shopping cart technology in the case of a commerce site, use of logo and other trademark graphics, and any other images you include that give a site its flavor. Even your site content, and the stykle in which it's written is part of the presentation. Depending on the purpose of your site, it can be professional, flamboyant, friendly, or many flavors in between. Even the sections you include (background on your or your company, helpful information for visitors to your site, a blog, etc.) help to create a unique style that reflects your intent. Many content management systems (CMS) available today enable you to build and maintain your own site, but if you are completely unfamiliar with the process, you may be better off hiring someone to teach you or just turn the whole process over to web developer with experience in CMS.

Pathway through Site

Also known as a site's "content hierarchy" or, more simply, the "navigation," the pathway involves all the places visitors to a site can go and the route they take to get around within your site to find what they are looking for. This can be linear, as in a very simple site, or there may be multiple routes to and from the various locations within a site. The more time spent planning this, the greater the ease of navigation and user satisfaction.

Promotion

Once a site is built it's time to tell everyone about it. This process can be very time-consuming and the results are often inexact and unpredictable. At this stage you mainly need to understand that simply building a site does not ensure traffic. Therefore, while your site is being designed is also the time to begin planning ways to draw attention to your site. Some strategies may include:

- plan for search engine and directory submissions (do-it-yourself or hire it done)
- redesign company collateral to include web address (work with your graphic designer or advertising professional to do this)
- purchase of print ads to announce a site launch
- creating a "buzz" via participation in blogs, social networking sites, and discussion lists
- issue press releases

Read more about this process, called Search Engine Optimization (SEO) in our companion article, "SEO Primer." Just request via email and we'll send you a copy.

Price

The total cost of establishing a website includes:

- choosing and then registering your domain name
- selecting a host company

- contracting with a designer, cost of which may also include subcontracted specialty work (such as copywriting, advanced scripting or graphics)
- performing necessary site maintenance and site updates(an ongoing process)
- budgeting for the promotion of the site.

All of these costs varies greatly and the choices are endless. For instance, some designers charge a flat rate, while others work on an hourly basis. Many people hope to be able to handle their own ongoing site updating but discover that they they need to purchase additional software or subscribe to fee-based Content Management Systems (online services that help with this task). Free hosting opportunities abound, and these come with various strings attached. Registering your site domain name is one of the first things you'll need to do, and the price to do so varies widely from one company to another. Get your finances in order and make sure you've allowed for all of these costs.

Protection of Assets

Sorting out issues surrounding ownership of "intellectual property" can be very complicated. Copyrighting the content of a site can offer some protection against piracy. Having legal counsel review the content and advise on any necessary statements of disclaimer may be advisable. Also, insisting upon a work agreement or contract before any site design begins is essential. Similarly, ask to see work samples before hiring your developer. When your site is complete, ask your designer to provide you with a copy of all the files it's made up of. Also make certain to keep your hosting company login information on file, ditto your domain registration information. Designers move away, go out of business, or you may change designer at some future date. You'll be up a creek if you don't have this information handy. Today, another problem is content theft, in which unscrupulous people lift your art and/or copy and present it as their own on their own website.

Are you ready to dive in? Ask for our "Web Site Planning Sheet," which will help you get all your resources together.