

# Launching a New Website: The Checklist

*“Creating a new website is like having a baby – the first one really is the hardest.”*

These words came from one of our current clients, during the early wireframe phase of his first website. And although we make the process as easy as possible for our clients, it remains a valid point. Your website is your company’s public face after all, so you really do want to make sure that each and every detail is *just right*.

The process can be overwhelming for the uninitiated. If this describes you, read on. What follows is a basic, plain-language checklist for getting your organization online.

## **1. Purpose**

Before you do anything else, you need to create a plan... and this plan needs to be centered around the question: *What purpose do you want your website to serve?*

In essence, you need to develop a proper job description for your website. What do you want it to DO for you? Will it be a simple informational marketing tool and point of contact? Will it serve as an online community, gallery or forum? Do you want an online storefront with e-commerce capabilities? Do you want to position yourself as an authority in your field through the provision of news and resources? The requirements for every website are unique, so you will need to decide which functions best serve your organization’s specific needs.

## **2. Web Host**

A web host is not the same as your Internet Service Provider (ISP). Your ISP simply provides access to the internet. If you want a website of your own, you will need to effectively “rent” the space for it on a hosting company’s server.

A hosting company owns and maintains X number of servers. On each server, X number of websites is stored. With that in mind, there are three common options for hosting:

- **Shared** means that you share a server with several other websites, and is the cheapest.
- **Dedicated** hosting gets you a server all to yourself, and is the most expensive.
- **Semi-dedicated** reserves a server for a very small number of clients.

For most websites, shared hosting *with a quality hosting company* is more than adequate. If you anticipate high volumes of traffic or bandwidth, however, you will want to look into dedicated or semi-dedicated hosting options. Keep in mind that servers are just like your own computer... if it is overloaded, outdated and neglected, it will perform slowly and inconsistently at best, and crash and fail at worst. Most bargain-basement hosting companies are able to offer cheap rates simply by squeezing as many accounts as possible onto a single, often outdated server. And then there’s the human element... when your email and website are down, quality customer service suddenly becomes *very* important.

Bad web hosts are a dime a dozen. It is *imperative* that you do your research, and choose a hosting company based on reliable measures of quality rather than gimmicks, sales or ad campaigns. Widely advertised does NOT equal quality. We both use and heartily recommend the pros at Fused, but always encourage clients to do their own research before deciding on which host best suits their needs.

## **3. Domain Name**

Now that you have a home for your website, you need a relevant, easily identifiable address. The domain name (DNS) is the address that appears in the address bar in your web browser, excluding 'http://www' (e.g., our domain name is 'sagemedia.ca'). Unfortunately, nobody owns a domain name for life. You need to register it (usually through your web host) to start, then renew it every year. If you don't, someone else can and will buy it up, and your site will be rendered both nameless and inaccessible.

Choosing a domain name is a frustrating, but important process. It is frustrating because of the simple fact that if it is a recognizable word, chances are someone has already registered it... even if they're not using it. There exists a scourge on legitimate online businesses everywhere known as domain squatters... these people buy up thousands of domain names, and simply sit on them until someone comes along who wants a name so badly that they are willing to pay an exorbitant price to buy it from the squatter. Squatters also buy up versions of existing business names and fill the pages with pay-per-click ads (known as link farms) so they generate ad revenue for themselves by capitalizing on well known companies. Your choice of domain name is nonetheless important – it needs to be relevant to your company (containing your company's name), easily remembered, and easy to spell. Once you've committed to a name, you'll want to stick with it.

#### **4. Target**

Further to your initial plan, it is important to decide exactly who you want to communicate with online. Your target audience should already have been established in your business plan. In planning your website, you need to keep in mind what THEIR needs are. Are they looking for information; Do they need a problem solved (hint: the answer is always yes); Do they want to be entertained, educated, or simply served? Combined with your purpose (and as you'll see, intertwined as well), a sharp focus on the target audience is central to your website strategy.

#### **5. USP**

Following from the previous items, your website will need to emphasize and reinforce your USP, or Unique Selling Point. This is the reason why people will choose to come to your site (and your company) rather than your competitors. Note you can't get to this point without first developing an understanding of your target audience. The USP is the answer to your customer's problems.

#### **6. Budget**

As the single most important online marketing investment your company will make, you will need to determine a realistic and appropriate budget for the design and development of your company's website. Plan to invest well into four figures for a properly planned, well designed and expertly executed business website. Rates vary *wildly* between providers – the web design field is largely unregulated, so be sure that you look for qualifications, reviews and referrals, and know exactly who you're hiring. This includes confirming precisely who will be doing the actual work, as many 'design' companies are simply middlemen outsourcing contracts to unqualified overseas labour farms.

#### **7. Content**

Given this article is being written by a designer, it may surprise you to see content weighing in first. The fact is, effective design relies on high quality content to provide context, depth, and relevance. If you think of your design as a restaurant, your content would be the food. Note that content is also not limited to the text within your pages; it also refers to images and brand materials (like your logo, for example). These are things that your designer should be provided with upfront, so they can move forward with context and purpose.

#### **8. Persona**

Refer back to the parameters covered in previous checklist items – namely your purpose, USP, and target audience. These items will help guide you in narrowing down a personality for your website. As part of a more thorough

consultation, any reputable designer will ask you fairly early in the process to provide them with a mood-board, or a selection of exemplar sites that portray the sort of image you want for your business (in addition to industry relevant examples of what you explicitly do NOT feel represents you). Obviously, the purpose is not to find something to copy, but rather to better define the mood and theme for your online presence.

## **9. Website Design**

This is the fun part, though it doesn't quite start out that way. Clearly, you'll need to research and choose a qualified, reputable designer. Find someone you feel comfortable with, review their portfolio, look for customer reviews, learn about their company and philosophies, and enter their name into a search engine. Finally, be sure to review the design company's terms and conditions. There are many designers whose terms specify that they (not you) retain ownership of all materials in perpetuity, placing restrictions on your usage. Remember, you will be investing a significant amount of time, trust, effort and capital in creating your website, so it is most certainly worth your time to ensure you really are choosing the right professional for the job.

Following your initial consultation and scope development, your designer will generally develop a wireframe for your approval. This serves as the skeleton for your site, establishing general placement/layout and structural presentation of site elements. It's boring, but it is important. Spending a little time here now will save a lot of time later on.

The wireframe will be followed by a visual concept presentation for your homepage. If all of the preliminary steps have been covered thoroughly and thoughtfully (by both the designer and yourself) and communication has been clear, this will generally serve as the starting point for your site. Of course, you may want to tweak some colours, graphic treatments or images to make the design perfect in your eyes. Remember though, your eyes are not the important ones... it is the eyes of your customers you really need to consider. And it is your designer's job to communicate your message with your target audience squarely in mind.

The design phase finishes with your visual layouts contained within PSD files. If your designer is also your developer, the transition to the next step will be seamless.

## **10. Website Development**

If your website designer and developer are the same person, they will already have been provided with the required functionality and content for your site. If you are going with a separate developer, you will need to provide them with PSD files for the site (provided by your designer) as well as a detailed outline of exactly what you want each part of the site to do, and an outline of your content. They will then turn your visual design into a fully functional, working piece of communicative art (in code).

Like designers, web developers are not created equal. Not by a long shot. Web development is a rapidly changing and ever-evolving field, with different technologies and techniques being created, updated, and rendered obsolete on a daily basis. Web standards are important to ensure that your website looks and works as it should for the maximum possible number of visitors, though even that is no guarantee. Your developer will also need to test the site for cross-browser and cross-platform compatibility (because not all browsers follow standards). The way your site is coded is incredibly important for usability, accessibility, and will have a strong impact on how your site ranks in search engines. So choose someone who really knows what they're doing.

## **11. Launch**

While there are certainly other considerations insofar as pre-launch marketing goes, at this point your website is technically ready to deploy. Your developer will want to migrate your site onto your server for you (the one that your domain name points to, provided by your hosting company), and then complete one final set of tests to make sure that everything continues to work the way it should in its new home. This is another reason your choice of hosting companies is important – the software installed on the server needs to be up-to-date so it can support the latest standards in development.

## **12. Corollaries**

### **Search Engine Optimization (SEO)**

SEO is an entire industry unto itself, with intricacies that extend far beyond the scope of this article. At minimum, if you want anyone to find your website on a search engine, your developer needs to employ best practices in organic, white-hat search engine optimization. Organic simply means that the optimization is contained within the code, content and build of the site itself. White-hat means that the methods employed are not prohibited or frowned-upon by the search engines themselves. Google et al WILL blacklist any website it finds that tries to circumvent the rules through unscrupulous SEO techniques.

There are additional SEO tactics you can (and should) employ yourself to maximize your exposure. Search engines rank sites higher if they have regular updates with new content, and a good number of quality inbound links. This does not mean link exchanges necessarily, as search engines often penalize sites that offer little in the way of actual content. Basically, the more high-ranking websites you can get to link back to your site, the better.

### **Social Media**

These days, everyone and their mother has a profile on Facebook and Twitter. Professionals will also have a profile on LinkedIn. Setting yourself up with a presence on social media can draw visitors to your site, IF handled properly. In order for this to work, you will need to invest time into keeping your profiles up to date, and you will need to make sure your contributions are relevant, appropriate, and suitably engaging for your visitors.

### **Offline Marketing**

The web is an incredibly important medium for marketing your business. However, you should not make the mistake of ignoring classic offline marketing techniques and resources. Be sure to update all of your promotional and corporate materials to include your website address and branded email. This includes just about everything that has your logo on it, including your business cards, stationery, signage, advertising, packaging, etc. If a customer sees an ad on the side of a bus as it rolls by, they will be significantly more likely to retain a website address than any other method of contact advertised.

### **Your Browser**

While your website will have been tested and developed to function in older browsers, it cannot be optimized for them. Current best practices and up-to-date techniques are simply not supported by many obsolete browsers, requiring secondary options and workarounds. So, open whichever browser you prefer to use, and update it to the latest version. It's free, it's easy, and it has the potential to improve your online experience exponentially.

Although this article has been fairly lengthy, it really is just a primer on the most important fundamentals of launching a new website. If an effective result is to be expected, the process becomes an involved one that requires considerable investment and effort on the part of the client and the designer/developer. It also requires a high level of expertise. As always, research is important. Hopefully this checklist will have you well on your way.