

Does Your Website Measure Up?

By

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The rationalization of many companies making the decision to develop an online presence often is that any presence on the Internet is better than no presence. Since a website can be established without much technical knowledge and not much capital expenditure, it seems like a logical approach. My competitors have a website, why not me? Register a domain name (www.your domain name.com) for \$70, pay a web hosting fee typically ranging from \$10 - \$100 per month (depending on the level of service required), use some off the shelf software costing a few hundred dollars to build a few web pages, and you are ready to present your message to the world.

One of the potential flaws to the logic that something is better than nothing is when the something, in this case a corporate web site and the image represented by the website, turns away potential site visitors rather than attracting them. Or worse, the website attracts a lot of visitors and sends them away with the wrong impressions about the company that established it.

Establishing a poorly conceived web site can damage a company's reputation while simultaneously turning away potential customers. This is particularly dangerous with the Internet since the damage may not be fully realized until it is too late to repair it. As one company's slogan appropriately puts it, your competitors are just a click away.

While companies do not plan to fail in promoting the "right image," they may fail to effectively plan.

Why does this happen?

Many companies simply do not have the expertise to understand what does and does not work in an online medium. They may rely too heavily on in-house staff that may understand technology but may not understand how to communicate online. Or, they may rely on a marketing or communications department that has limited experience communicating messages in that can take advantage of the interactive nature of the Internet. Without the proper experience, those in charge of rolling out a website may not even know the correct questions to ask.

Furthermore, since it is standard to measure a project by whether or not it is completed to satisfaction, it is all too common to view "completed to specifications" as the ultimate measurement when producing a website. This in spite of the fact that those judging satisfaction are not in the best position to be the judge.

Even companies that correctly plan their web site development efforts and involve the correct parties can still be left with a poorly conceived web site over time. Unlike

mature forms of media like print and television, Internet development relies on rapidly evolving technology. Many of the leading websites established just a couple of years ago, may now be viewed as obsolete and backwards thinking. Imagine a company trying to project an image of being forward thinking, cutting edge, and creative with a website based on outdated technology.

In Internet time, a couple of years may be equivalent to 10 – 15 years in other industries. While it may be acceptable to review projects in other industries after a few years, the rapidly changing technology of the Internet industry requires that reviews be conducted more often.

What can be done to ensure success over time of an online initiative ?

In order to avoid turning away potential customers, companies need to constantly assess the effectiveness of their websites. The first step is to determine what if anything needs to be improved. One cost-effective method to accomplish this is by conducting an independent site audit. Several major advertising and online agencies offer comprehensive brand assessments and technology audits that objectively measure the effectiveness of a site from both a branding and technology perspective. Such audits typically cost around \$10,000 - \$20,000 and include a variety of separate measurements. Final results of a site audit are often reported in the form of a scorecard or written evaluation report. Many site audits also include some recommendations on ways to improve an existing website. The most sophisticated reports provide measurements comparing the evaluated site to others in a particular industry and to those with “world class” (the best of the best) designations.

Some of the very basic items typically evaluated in a site audit include:

Color Consistency – Is there a color scheme and are they used consistently throughout the site.

Page Link Consistency – Are the links correctly established.

Technology Evaluation – Whether the site correctly implements some of the newer technologies or if the technology used is considered outdated.

Ease of Navigation – The average number of clicks to move from page to page and whether this number can be reduced.

Fonts – Are the fonts consistent and easy to read with the popular monitors.

Load Time – How long does it take to load each web page and is the load time consistent with normal Internet usage.

Using the results of the audit, can help companies plot strategies on how to best improve their online image. Options may include low cost items such as removing superfluous

page links to more costly endeavors such as a complete redesign using more sophisticated development tools. Other options may suggest re-evaluating the business justification for having a web-presence or expansion of a website to include greater functionality with revenue generating potential.

Conclusions

Whether you have an established website or have just recently launched one, investing in regularly scheduled independent site audits is an excellent strategy to help maintain a website that measures up to viewer expectations and that can stand the test of time.

With the rapid changes in web development tools, audits should probably be performed no later than every two years and should not be performed by the same set of people that created the last iteration of the website.

While it may be easy to discount the return on investment of performing a site audit, the danger of not performing one makes the investment worth the risk. If performed by a reputable, experienced agency that can provide a road map on how to improve an existing website, it is not uncommon for the site audit to pay for itself many hundreds of times over.

Since the Internet is an easy way to reach a large number of people in a short period of time, it is more important than ever to review existing sites and make sure they measure up.

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