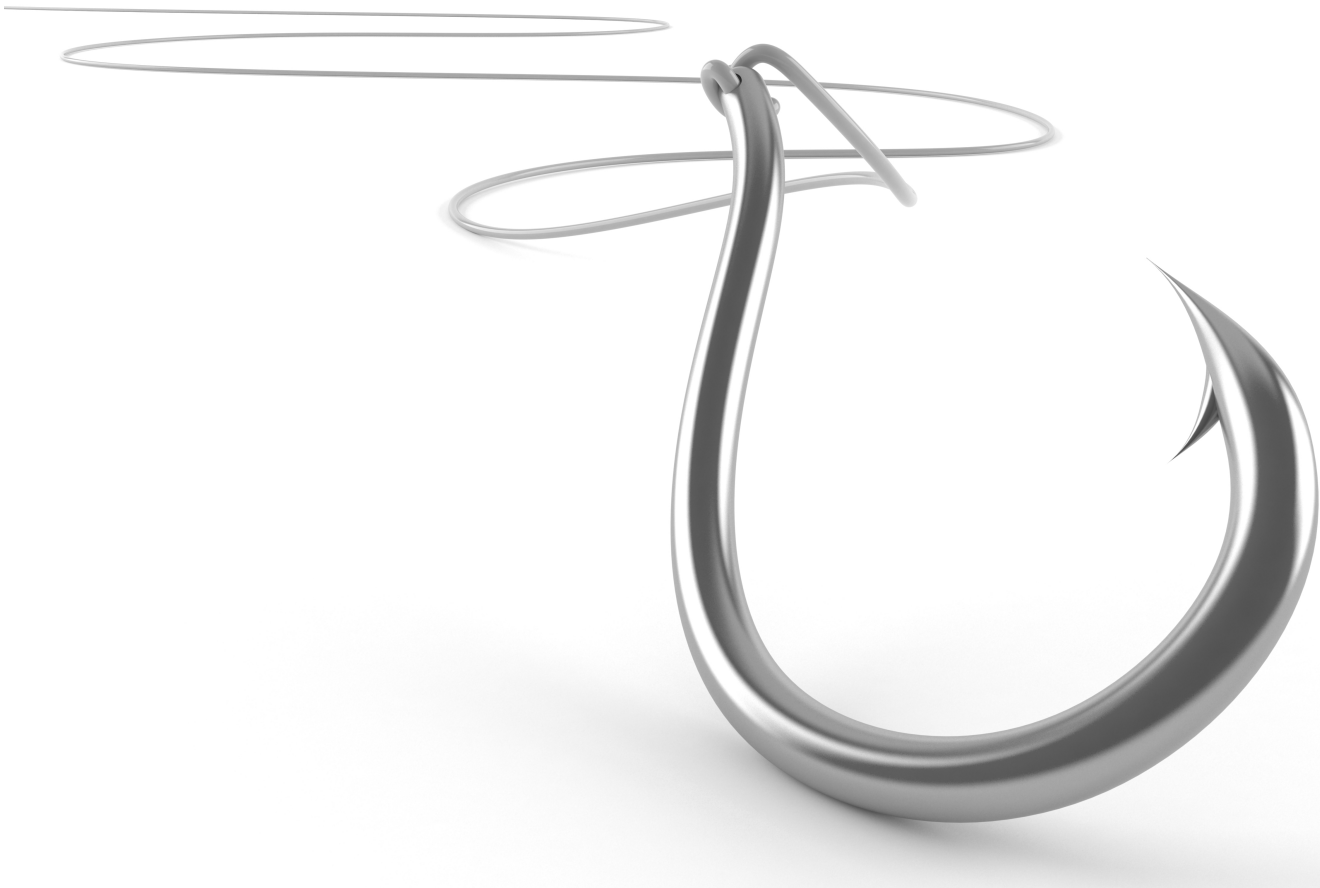




Six Steps to a Great Website

A strategic approach to Web design





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Introduction

So you're thinking about a new website or redesigning your current website, but where do you start? Who can you trust to help you make sure you're getting a website that's going to help you meet your business goals?

This is why I wrote this guide. I have put this guide together to help you navigate the process and make informed decisions about your website needs. I'll walk through the following steps with you:

Step 1: Goals, Let's figure out why

Step 2: Who is the Website For?

Step 3: Content Matters

Step 4: Make It Easy

Step 5: Marketing Makes the Difference

Step 6: How to Get Started

I'll answer some questions and I'll ask you some questions, all with the purpose of making sure you get a website that looks great, aligns with your goals and gets you moving forward smartly.

So let's get started...

Step 1: Goals Let's figure out why

Let's start with what is hopefully an easy question, why do you want a new website? This is always great first question to ask yourself whether this is your first website or you've had one for years.

There are many valid reasons for a new website, but make sure it's for the right, long-term reasons. Jumping in to a new website project simply because you want something "new and cool" is not always the best idea – chances are you'll be disappointed in six months when the new website love affair has simmered down.

"67% of the buyer's journey is now done digitally."

- SiriusDecisions

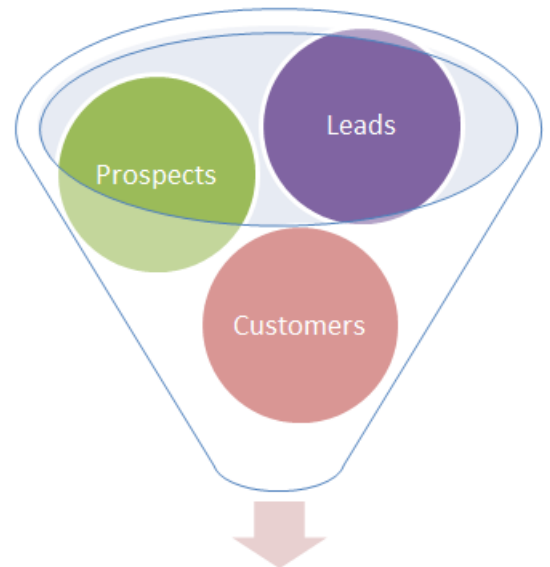
Identifying why you want (or need) a new site will help you navigate the site layout and design process more effectively and with a goal oriented approach. Here are some reasons for a new website:

- Generate more sales leads
- Sell products or services online
- Provide customer support and interaction
- Conduct business more efficiently
- Create general awareness of your business
- Communicate your brand more effectively

Businesses need a website to be built to accomplish specific goals. Having a clear "Why" that ties to measurable results is the best way to go. Your website can function as a static brochure that is passive or it can be an active sales tool that helps achieve specific business goals. The choice is yours.

This is also a great place to think about your sales funnel. Generally speaking, most visitors coming to your site are at the top of the funnel in research mode. Your website may be the only contact a potential customer has with you. So is your website helping you reach out, connect with and ultimately convert them to a customer?

Figure out the "Why" and you're ready for the next step.



Your sales funnel is a key part of planning out your website

Step 2: Who is the Website For?

Another important question to ask. Your website has to be geared towards certain audiences. The reason is simple not everyone is supposed to spend time on your website.

So ask yourself, who is your website for? Here are some questions to help you:

- What audiences will the website be designed and built for?
 - Prospects
 - Customers
 - Vendors
 - Employees
- What will your audience do on your site and what should they hope to accomplish while there?
 - Research your company, your product or service, your reputation, etc.
 - Determine if your company is trustworthy
 - Buy products
 - Try to get in touch with someone at your company for customer service
- What do you want your audiences to do on the website?
 - Fill out a lead form?
 - Download an e-book or some other offer?
 - Sign up for an email newsletter?
 - Buy a product?
 - Fill out a survey?
 - Learn more about your product or service and give you a call?
- Do you have content and messaging that is relevant, interesting and easy to understand?
- Does your content clearly communicate how you solve your audience's problems?
- What are your calls to action throughout the website?
 - Free trial
 - Schedule a free consultation
 - Learn more

Personas

Another aspect to consider about “Who” is personas. A persona is a brief description of the type of person who is visiting your site and the role they play in the decision-making process. Here are some questions you can ask to help determine the personas for your business:

- What is the person’s role in the company and in the buying process?
 - i. Are they just doing research?
 - ii. Are they the decision-maker or a key influencer?
- What is motivating them to search for the service or product you offer?
- What are their demographics? Are they predominantly male or female? What is the age range for this person?
- What problem are they trying to solve?
- How does your product or service solve their problem?

In doing this, you can create multiple profiles to help you plan your content for maximum impact. For example, here are some common personas:

- “Linda” – Administrative assistant (researcher) – directed by the company owner to research vendors. Looks for companies that have good reputations and that are easily found when searching through Google or Bing. Serves as a gate-keeper and as a vendor qualifier.
- “John” – Department manager (influencer) – gives input into vendor requirements. Reviews initial vendors discovered by Administrative assistant. Gives recommendations to owner.
- “Jane” – Company owner (decision-maker) – determines which vendor to move forward with. Interested in cost as well as impact on the business operations, sales, etc. Considers input from various managers.



Develop a clear picture of who is using your website and what you want them to do.

Personas will vary by company and by industry and can go into much more detail than we have here. The goal is to have a clear picture of who is coming to your website and how you need to communicate with them.

Step 3: Content Matters

Now that we have goals for the website and know who the folks are that will visit, what will you say to them that matters? Please don't underestimate the value of this step. Your content should be compelling and make sense to the readers (i.e., the "who").

Think about the type of content you plan to include on the site. Is it mainly text? What about images? Videos? What pages do you plan to include on your site? There is a lot to consider when it comes to content. Below are some tips for creating your content.

Do's...

Do research keywords. Make sure you are using keywords and phrases that people will use when searching for you, your products or your services. If you use the term "pre-owned automobile" but your customers are searching for "used cars", you're not going to be found as easily on the search engines. That's because the search engines (Google, Bing, etc.) will use the content on your site as a means of helping determine when your website should show up in the search results.

Do use great photos. In the age of Instagram and Pinterest, people are accustomed to seeing great photography. Images can quickly convey a lot of information and emotion that mere words cannot. Please take note that poor photos will take away from your brand's image, so be careful about which images you post.

Do keep it simple and use bullet points. People need to quickly decipher the key information and decide if they want to continue reading. If your site primarily contains paragraphs of font size 10 text, visitors will quickly skip to the next site on the list. Make it easy for people to digest key points.

Do use clear navigation that people will understand. This is not necessarily the place to get cute. What you consider clever may confuse your site visitors. Wow them with your service or quality, not your wittiness (unless you're a comedic consultant). If you do attempt wittiness, double check that it's not creating confusion for your audience.



Use great photos to tell your story.

Create calls to action throughout your site. Make it clear what you would like people to do. Here are some examples:

- Schedule a free consultation
- Download a free ebook
- Sign up for our wickedly awesome newsletter
- Call us to learn more
- Buy now

Don'ts...

Don't use jargon that customers don't understand. Every industry has its own vernacular and acronyms. Make sure you're not using unfamiliar terms on your website unless your customers are familiar with them and use them too.

Don't ramble about your awesomeness (even if you are awesome). If you give people answers to their questions, it will help them understand what you do (or sell) and how it benefits them. They aren't there to learn how great you think you are.

Don't hide your strengths. While people don't want to be overwhelmed with someone else's ego, they do want to know what you're good at and how it can help them. Clearly state your value proposition in a way that demonstrates your ability to make your customer's life better in some way and how you're different from competitors.

Don't skimp on writing great content. Developing great content takes time, and once you get it right, you'll want to keep an eye on your content to keep it fresh and relevant.

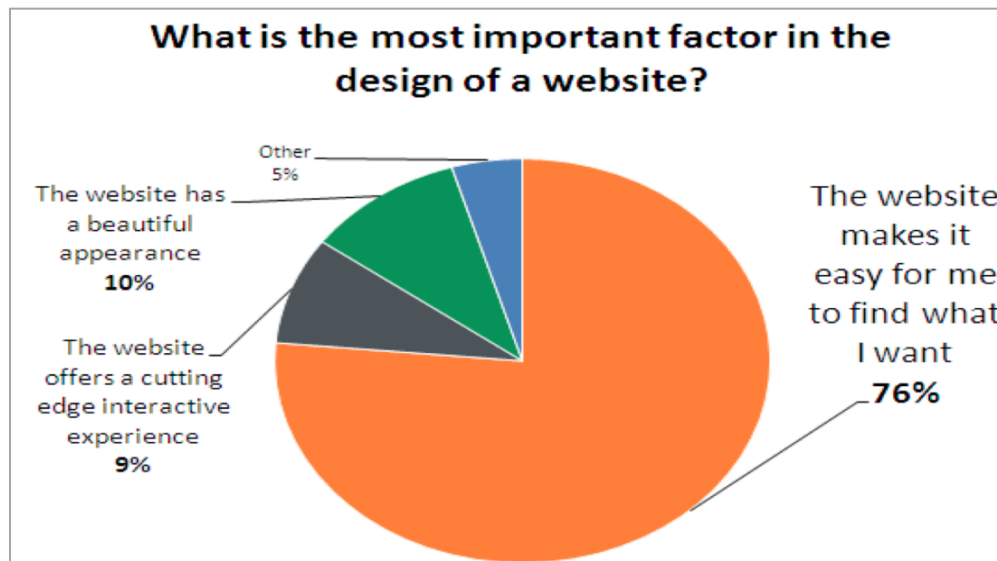
Keep Working

You may already have access to great content, whether on your current website, sales collaterals or even in your head. If you aren't a good writer, consider hiring someone who is. It will be a worthwhile investment.

Step 4: Make It Easy

Defining the why and who are vitally important to building a successful website. And there is one vital principle that absolutely, positively has to be observed – your website needs to be easy to use. A pretty website that is hard to navigate isn't going to do you much good. This is where it's a good idea to *talk to the people who are using your website* – ask them questions to help determine if your site is easy to use or not.

Research shows that ease is a top priority for your website visitors:



Source: HubSpot, *The Science of Website Redesign*, June 2011

This goes back to the “why” and the “who” of your website. When you clearly understand what you want them to do on the site, you can make sure the site design, layout and content all line up to make it easy for visitors to do what they're supposed to. However, if you don't clearly understand these details, your site will most likely turn people away.

Tip: Make online forms as short as possible. No one likes to fill out a form of any length! Do ask a question or two to pre-qualify them, but only get the minimal amount of information that you need. There will be opportunities later in the sales cycle to ask for more information.


Step 5: Marketing makes the Difference

Getting a new website (or redesigning an old one) is a great move. However, it's just the first step in the process of reaching your goals. While this paper isn't concentrating on the marketing side of things, I feel it's important to at least mention it, because these days, just building a website is not enough. The companies that are growing their businesses through the Web are the ones actively marketing their businesses online.

Marketing your site online involves the three basic components described below:

1. **Getting found** – Getting qualified visitors to your website is crucial. This can be done through tactics such as: search engine optimization (SEO), social media, blogging and pay per click (PPC) advertising.
2. **Converting visitors** – As people are visiting your website, you want to move them into your sales funnel from visitor to lead (and ultimately a customer). Email marketing, special offers and clear calls to action are just a few of the ways to make this happen.
3. **Measuring results** – Tracking movement towards your goals is an essential part of measuring the ROI of your marketing activities. Tools such as Google Analytics provides meaningful data to help you gauge your marketing effectiveness.

This whole process might sounds complicated but it is based on specific, measurable goals which are then pursued via a planned marketing strategy that increases traffic, converts leads and can be easily measured and adjusted.

A large, light blue decorative bracket shape frames the quote and attribution text.

“Many Americans begin their purchasing experience by doing online research to compare prices, quality, and the reviews of other shoppers. Even if they end up making their purchase in a store, they start their fact-finding and decision-making on the Internet.”

- Jim Jansen, Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, September, 2010

Step 6: How to Get Started

Consider the Timing and Cost

“How long will it take?” and “How much will it cost?” are two frequently asked questions. And the answer is: “It depends”.

Building a new website takes time, usually several months and the cost varies depending on the complexity of the website, the type of design, the number of pages, etc. Talking to a professional web developer can help you determine what you to expect for your timeline and your budget.



Cost or Investment?

We understand that there are deadlines and budgets to be mindful of, so here are some factors that influence the timing and the cost:

- Do you want a unique and custom design or are you okay using an existing template?
- Do you already have a logo and other marketing material to guide the design process or are you starting from scratch?
- Does the site require any type of a database to store information or to generate reports?
- How many total pages are on the website?
- How quickly do you need it done?
- Are you providing relevant content or do you want someone else to create it (write it, take pictures or use stock photos, etc.)?
- Are you entrusting this project to your friend’s cousin (who is a short order cook during the week) or would you prefer to partner with a company that has been doing this for years?
- Do you have the time to do this yourself or do you want someone else to handle the details?

The answers to these questions can help you decide if you want to do it in-house or find a third party to help you.

The Case for a Professional

We know that not everyone can afford to spend thousands on a website, but we also know that a poorly designed, amateurish website can cost more in the long run due to lost sales opportunities. Take a look at your competitors' websites – do they have a nice, professional look? Can you compete against them with a basic design that looks homemade?

“If you think it's expensive to hire a professional to do the job, wait until you hire an amateur.”-Red Adair

There are numerous shops that design and build websites. Some are industry specific while others have broad portfolios. Some are Web design only while others offer additional services including hosting, ongoing support and marketing services. Be sure to do your research to see which shops best meet your needs, both now and in the future.

If you go the route of hiring a professional, here are some things to consider in selecting a company:

- Do you like the work they have done for other customers?
- Do they have a good reputation?
- Are they interested in helping you accomplish your goals or mainly in building a “pretty” website?
- Do they outsource your project to Asia or do they have an in-house team?
- What do their customers say about them?
- What was your first impression – do they care about you and your business or were they cold and impersonal?
- Do they have a track record of helping their clients grow?
- Do they have a portfolio of website designs to show you?

You want to make sure that the company you choose to work with is capable of helping you achieve your goals and that you are confident they are interested in your long term success and not just selling you a website.

Conclusion

Building a new website is a significant undertaking that requires thoughtful planning and execution. My goal for this guide is to give you a good framework for thinking through everything that you need to either build a new website or redesign your current website. I am very passionate about empowering business owners and professionals like you with knowledge that will help you achieve your goals.

If you are interested in talking to someone, please contact us for a free assessment of your needs. We would love to talk to you about what a great website and a strong Internet marketing strategy can do for your business or organization.

Thank You,

Jason Johnson

Chief Marlin

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About Marlin Consulting Solutions

For over a decade, the team at Marlin Consulting Solutions has been obsessed with creating user and search engine friendly website solutions for our clients. Our team balances the demands of digital design with the practicalities of online technology...while maintaining usability, compliance, security, scalability, and performance requirements.

We're located in Florida, and we love our state. It's a vibrant place with great thinkers and new opportunities. We have 2 locations one in Jacksonville and one in Palm Coast. If you're ever in the area, stop by – we'd love to have a cup of coffee with you.

About the Author

Jason is a creative online marketing professional with over a decade of solid B2B and B2C experience in delivering profitable solutions that drive sales, attract and maintain customers, and strengthen the client's corporate brand.

When he's not helping clients, Jason can be found boating, grilling, spending time with his family and aging rum. He's involved in the community and stays very active chasing his daughter and great dane.