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Sales from the Internet – Why doesn't my web site work? – Part 1

By Dennis McDonough

I have had the opportunity to work with a couple of companies recently that had invested in very expensive web sites only to find that they were not effective. The sites worked well enough that an experienced web user could navigate through them. These companies had spent more than their budgets, created some unreal expectations and were not reaping the rewards.

The problem was not that the sites did not function but that they did a lot of wiz bang, or wow features that drove away customers. You work hard to attract a customer to your site, and then you must keep them. There are many customers that abandon web sites daily, for a variety of reasons. These site owners have had their experience with the new web site, now they are asking...Why doesn't my web site work?

The First Challenge: No Standards

All too often I see web sites that just did not have a plan. Every page or section is different, a new layout, another color set, and different menus. Without similarities between pages the user can become unsure of what should be happening. The first page of your site should set the users expectations and define the rules for the coming pages.

How do you get around your site or where is the menu? Designate a single location for the menus. Select the top, right, left or bottom side. These are expected places. Many site designers believe every site should be following the format of a book, your index is on the left and the information is on the right. After all most of us read left to right. The left side menu is a good example to follow that can increase your site's usability.

The menu can be anywhere on the page, what you must do is reserve this same space on every page for the menus. By repeating the placement the user becomes comfortable and will know where to look on the next page. If the user has to take time to figure out where he is going, they can just as easily give up and go on to another site.

Are you trying every feature of FrontPage? The menu should work the same from page to page. On one page don't have a click expand the menu and then on the second page have the menu item glow when you click it. This might make a good prank, but not a great menu. Your user has the expectations that you defined in your first page. Don't let the user become confused about the menu's function.

Your site should follow the established standards of the web. Just take the significance of a link. Do your links stand out? Are they underlined? What is there for the users identify that item as a link? Do all of your links work? It is not just a question of taking the user some place else, but is this link connecting to the correct place and is it relevant to this page?

Follow a color scheme. We organize many things in our lives by colors. We will follow a red line through a building or a city. Colors have meanings to us. Green for go, red for stop, blue can be cool and calming, yellow warm and soothing, harsh colors can disturb. Take time and great care in selecting your colors, and then use them. The pages don't have to be identical in the color placement, but they must work together. People become surprised by a completely new look and theme in the middle of a site.

This is not something new, far from the meaning of life stuff, just observations of the fundamentals that can get overlooked and often completely ignored. In the coming issues I will explore the other issues that keep sites from working. Hopefully by identifying these common issues you will be better prepared to choose and work with your web design company. After all the work and you get customers to your web site, you really want them to do business with you.

Sales from the Internet – Why doesn't my website work? – Part 2

This is the second in a series of articles that examines why websites do not meet the goals of their companies.

The eternal question is, "What can I do to get more business out of my website?" As with many business issues there is not a single answer. Usually there are many problems that affect a website's performance. Marketing and Search Engine Optimization can bring customers to a site. The design and hosting can drive the same customers away.

The Second Challenge – Speed

People talk about speed all the time. They complain how slow their computers are. They want the computer to bring them all immediate gratification. Why would your customers be any different?

It is great to know that bandwidth is always increasing; more people are getting DSL and cable modems at home. The general public, however, is still dialing up to the Internet. Yes, they try to get to the Internet at 56 kbps but are still lucky to connect around 28.8 kbps.

You need to keep this in mind as your website is designed. Don't let your connectivity set the parameters for your site design. Have your web designer show you speed tests of their ideas before committing. Take the time to look at your website through your users computers and eyes.

Most people will be patient enough to wait a little bit of time for a site to come up. There seem to be 10 seconds before most people wonder why they are not getting a response from your site. So, if your first page is a gigantic full color image that is just perfect on paper, you might find that your customers are not going to wait to have that loaded on their screens. They will just move on to the next URL on the search page.

As they say, "Do the Math!" You can calculate the amount of graphics and text your site loads at each page. Get the list of files that a page calls, add each of their individual sizes, and you will know how much data has to come from your website to your customers computer.

To view how fast this really is, get one of your old modems out and test your site. Test it at different times of the day. This will give you an example of real time that someone will have to wait for your site.

What can you do to improve the speed of your website?

First, is your web host. A good web host will have multiple fast Internet connections and a limited number of sites on each server with a 99.9% uptime. Many site owners are now demanding off site monitoring for website availability and performance. Monitoring should be done from more than one location to be accurate.

If your site is on a server that has 250 other websites on it, you can find that your site may not perform well, no matter what you do. You are competing with all of the other sites at that host for the Internet connectivity, and the other sites on your server for the processor and hard drive.

Second, take a look at your site. Start with the graphics. All of the images must be optimized for Web display. Did your designer break up the large images into many small images? Did they setup any images to be preloaded? Preloading is very helpful if you reuse an image many times.

Does your site use a lot of animations or Flash? Flash is a really neat tool that is becoming very popular. It does require a special web browser plug-in for your customers to see it. If it is a very large file, not only do they have to install the plug-in, your customers also can be waiting a while to see it.

There are many tips out there that can help, but it comes down to the designer. Are they looking to produce a site for you that will perform your business needs or are they looking for another 'wiz bang' design for their portfolio?

It comes down to this, a website, just like a car, needs to be designed for the customers needs.

Sales from the Internet – Why doesn't my website work? – Part 3

This is the third in a series of articles that examines why websites do not meet the goals of their companies.

The eternal question is, "What can I do to get more business out of my website?" As with many business issues there is not a single answer. Usually there are many problems that affect a website's total performance. Marketing and Search Engine Optimization can bring customers to a site. The design can drive those same customers away.

The Third Challenge – The Bleeding Edge

Using the latest tool, or the latest release of software in the computer world is known as the Bleeding Edge. Poor site performance, decreased usability, increased development time and unknown incompatibilities all are results of a website being created while depending on the Bleeding Edge.

There is always a temptation to let your website designer use the latest new tool that comes along. Sometimes this can be justified; usually that is not the case for a complete website. Just ask yourself the question, "Do I always install everything new software or upgrade on my computer?" Do you want to expect that your customers will install new software to their computers to use your website?

The Internet has been around for quite a while. Accepted standards have matured over the past few years. At first there was just text, then HTML and browsers came along. This allowed us to show graphics and images. Browsers changed and offered features allowing the use of scripting, and database integration, that we come to expect as part of the Internet experience. Then more ideas came along, how to control printable pages, or use motion and sound. Changes in the standards have all come with the increased performance of the personal computers and bandwidth. Each new tool and feature has new requirements and expectations for the systems they run on.

Have your web designer try new software features out on as part of your site. Verify the acceptance of them. Website statistics can tell us a lot about the users' experience. If people only open the first page of an area and don't continue on to the next in the group, may mean that they never actually see that page. These same statistics can point out many site performance problems and usability issues.

Look at what happens if a feature cannot be loaded. Test with a computer that does not have the latest browser installed. If it is an element of the web page, does it leave a hole on that page? Is this where you lose your buyer? Do you give your customers an alternative path to this information? . Don't just get

excited over any new features and expect that all of your potential customers will immediately upgrade their software to just use your website.

Using the latest software is not by itself bad. Using a new tool without proper thought, design and testing can be disastrous. You need to keep today's Internet standards in mind as your website is designed.

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