Contents

What is a website?

A website is a **tool**
accessible via the **internet**
that can **sell, explain, describe, and/or advise**.

A website is composed of
content of text and images
arranged in a **visual design**
that has a **style**
and expresses an **attitude**.

Why does design matter?

- The quality of a site reflects directly on its owner: an amateurish site reflects an amateurish business while a professional site reflects a professional business.
- Design can attract or repel site visitors.
- Design can facilitate the website's purpose or work against it.
- Design can increase sales or not.
- Design can make site changes and/or expansion easy or difficult.

What are the elements of website design?

Topic The focus of a discourse or a section of a discourse. Typically a website presents several subjects, each having several topics.

Text Written words arranged in phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and lists.

Image The best image both reflects the subject matter and aids in its explanation and description.

Writing The best writing is brief and to the point so the reader can "get it" in the first sentence or paragraph.

Message Text and/or images focused on a single topic.

Story A series of messages that tell a single story.

Page The basic unit of what a visitor sees at one time. A page consists of text and/or images. A single page is opened in the web browser window at a time. When a page is longer than the browser

window, a vertical scroll bar lets the reader view the lower area. Similarly, when a page is wider than the browser window, a horizontal scroll bar lets the reader view the right side.

Typography Fonts and sizes of text, line spacing, line lengths, paragraph margins. A variety of elements that go together is the most interesting.

Color Text, lines, backgrounds, and images each are colored, even if it is only black and white.

Layout Arrangement and composition of text and images. The best is harmonious and easy to read. However, there is a time and place for startling layouts—they get attention.

Navigation The means by which a reader can move from one page to another, and from one place in a page to another place in the same page. The basic unit of navigation is a hypertext link. The best scheme is obvious, consistent, and complete (all pages can be accessed); the visitor only has to "learn" once. Often, navigation includes a hierarchical menu structure of links (but this is often overused and misused).

Graphic design The appearance of the pages formed by layout, typography, color, and navigation.

Style The overall feeling conveyed by the graphic design. For example, style can be hard, brittle, or soft; lively or quiet; *avant garde* or old fashioned; etc.

Site architecture The underlying structure of the pages, their relationships with each other, and their organization into directories (folders).

What guidelines can help direct the design?

- Design should actively support your goals (e.g., attract a lot of visitors, sell x dollars of product per month, etc.).
- Appearance and style should be consistent across all pages (or all pages of a group), reflect your organization's values and goals, and stand out among the other websites (especially those of your competitors).
- The home (first) page can differ from subsequent pages (think of a magazine cover).
- All elements should work together as a cohesive whole.
- Appearance should be easily readable.
- The organization of each page should be obvious when viewed from the distance where you can no longer read the words.
- Make it easy for visitors to find out what you're offering.
- Showcase key subjects. Key points should stand out against their background.
- Put the most important things first. All a page's important information should be at the top and be completely visible when the page is first opened in a browser window at maximum size.
- Avoid long pages that require lots of scrolling to read. When a long page-document will likely be printed, include it as an Acrobat PDF file in addition to the HTML pages.
- Writing should follow the journalism model (key points first, supporting details later), not the theses, including research and reports, model (goals first, details next, conclusions last). Think of an executive summary or abstract as a model of highlighting the key points without losing context.
- Use bulleted lists to make text more readable.
- Avoid long paragraphs and series of long paragraphs with no alteration in typography to "punctuate" them. These paragraphs will largely go unread.
- In most cases, line spacing (called "line height" in CSS) should be greater than the default to be readable and attractive.

- White space is a valuable part of a graphic design.
- Avoid the need for a horizontal scroll bar.
- Links to other websites should open in a new browser window. This leaves your website still open.

What physical objects are most similar to a web site—and can serve as design models?

Magazine
Newspaper
Catalog
Brochure
Billboard—a good model for a one-page website or one that is in development.

How do I get started?

The steps to create a website are listed here grouped by phase. NOTE: While much of the work can and should be done by you (because who knows your business better than you?), some of it is best done by a professional web developer, especially reviewing the requirements (for completeness, interest, and appropriateness) and the design.

Establish requirements

1. Write a clear and concise statement of your organization or business: your purpose, values, goals, products, and services.
2. Write a clear and concise statement of what you want the website to accomplish—its goals. Identify your audience—who you want to visit the site and what you want them to do.
3. List the topics and messages of the site and organize them loosely. This is the basis of the size and scope of the site. Compare the list with the statements from steps 1 and 2 to be sure they are adequately reflected in the topic list. Group messages into stories where appropriate. As an example, if you want to establish a connection to the sheep that supply the wool from which you fabricate wool mattresses, you might want seasonal photos of the sheep (sort of "a year in the life of") as well as photos of what's happening now.
4. Identify what site content will change and how often.
5. Identify what content requires security and the nature of that security.
6. Identify software tools and methods for *developing* a DEVELOPMENT web site, *publishing* it to the PRODUCTION web site, and modifying both afterwards. Having two sites makes it possible for you to make extensive changes and publish them all at once with the confidence that they work properly.
7. Schedule the work: Identify responsible persons and outline tasks and time frames.

Design

8. Develop a graphic identity for your organization/business. This can include a logo and typography and be consistent with your business cards and letterhead.
9. Determine the site architecture.
10. Group messages and/or stories onto pages. You can begin this with paper and pencil, then use a word processor to verify actual size.

11. Determine layout and navigation, then color and typography. Adjust as needed to accomplish a beautiful, readable composition.
12. Develop one or more CSS stylesheets to encompass all the appearance and layout aspects of your design.
13. Develop one or more HTML templates that reflect your graphic design and link to the stylesheet(s). Include comments as necessary for the HTML editor.
14. Document the design for use by developers now and in the future (when they are changing the site.

Develop
15. Create the DEVELOPMENT website. This can be on a desktop computer's hard drive, on a file server when one is available, or in a special place in your PRODUCTION web site (which is on your ISP's web server).
16. Rewrite text as necessary to optimize its clarity and conciseness.
17. Using HTML templates, create individual web pages.

Test the DEVELOPMENT website
18. With a web browser, open each page. Compare its appearance and content with the design. Check for typos, including the spelling of proper names. Test all links.
19. Correct and retest as necessary until no errors are found.
20. Evaluate appearance and operation of site in terms of your requirements and design. It may be that you will need to make a few adjustments. If so, retest.

Publish website
21. Copy all files and directories to the PRODUCTION web site. Usually this involves using a FTP program.
22. Compare its appearance and content with the DEVELOPMENT website. Test all links. You want to be absolutely sure what your visitors will find.
23. Copy missed files and directories and retest when necessary until no errors are found.

What about do-it-yourself websites?

Can you create your own website? Yes, especially if you rely on a consumer-oriented software tool. Will the site accomplish what you want it to? The short answer is: no. The long answer is: that depends on how good a web designer you are. Web design is a career unto itself. It is unlikely that your attention to your own business permits you to also be a skilled web designer.

Web design is a complex skill based on expertise in the following:

- graphic design
- user interface design
- technical writing
- business requirements analysis
- HTML and CSS

and involving:

- creativity and

- discipline.

How do you find a skilled web designer? Research carefully, ask for recommendations, study portfolios, interview thoroughly—how will they do the work? Price is always an issue, but don't forget that you get what you pay for—(relatively) inexpensive work creates websites that cannot be changed easily, so it will cost a lot more to make apparently simple changes later on. Include cost as one of your business requirements. Make the final payment contingent on your acceptance of the site—after thorough testing.