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# Planning for success

## How to plan for a website that works

There are generally two approaches to the planning and building of websites: the first is the 'we need one because everyone else has one' approach, and the other, 'lets build a website as part of our overall information and communication strategy'. Believe it or not, both are equally capable of being a success or a failure. A good dose of well-researched planning and a realistic assessment of the objectives are all that is required.

These days, with the term 'e-commerce' bandied around with as much street credibility and authority as 'share portfolio', yet another dimension can be included in the matrix. In reality, it takes considerable investment to make a site qualify for true 'e-commerce' status, and this introduction to the planning of a successful site would be remiss if I did not factor e-commerce into the equation. However, I will at this stage assume that most *inCite* readers are more concerned about the flow of information, and less so about e-money (i-transactions versus e-transactions). Therefore the task of factoring in e-commerce strategies will be left for later.

### Getting answers first...

To begin, a number of important questions need to be asked. Whilst they are not ranked in any particular order, there is some inherent logic in starting with the first listed here:

1. *What is the purpose of the site?* This was touched on briefly in last month's column. For a business or organisation, a study of the current mission statement or strategic plan is enough to present a direction to be followed in the planning of a website. If the intent is to inform and communicate, then the site needs to be built with this as a first principle. If the site is to offer services that cannot be found or duplicated through other channels, then these services

need to be carefully considered in relation to the overall business plan. Personal websites, on the other hand, are much more free-form — and mostly reflect the whims of the owner. Do not assume that a site will have a single purpose, however. Technology advances require planners to consider how to integrate a range of services — though it is interesting to note that technology advances within the sphere of the internet have created a more diverse range of capability of users, and has not propelled the bulk of users to a higher technological level.

2. *Intended visitors?* Following on from the previous point, a thorough understanding of the potential visitors/clients/users is vital to the success of a website. If twenty per cent of your intended audience only has access to dated technology (640 x 480 pixel, 8-bit screens, for example) then where do you draw the line and force them to compromise? Can you compromise instead? Although the world wide web community has virtually settled on two leading web browsers for the bulk of web browsing, not everyone is using the latest software with all of the bells and whistles that you might have at your disposal. Most 'plug-ins' that offer enhancements to web browser capability are used less and less frequently — people are now demanding simpler websites, simpler web browsers, and simpler overall navigation. To get it right, the planning of a website must cater to the needs of the user, 100 per cent of the time. There are ways to attract people to your site (and we will deal with those later), but ultimately you need to keep them coming back. This is particularly important if you wish to demonstrate that your site is worth the expense of creating it!

3. *Intended uses?* Closely tied to a consideration of the visitors to your site, the actual uses are an integral measure of how well your site will function. These will undoubtedly change and grow over time, but in the first instance an appraisal of the content of a site is important to its success. As mentioned last month, the transposing of a written series of documents onto a computer screen is not enough, and may even be inappropriate. Research has shown that users

treat the web rather differently to the printed word, and yet paradoxically there is a growing band of users who will print what they find off the screen, thus disabling all of the advantages of hypertext. Personally, I think that the advantages of hypertext have been oversold, and that many do not like to break their train of concentration or thought processes by clicking on gratuitous and context-muddy links. On the other hand, printing a page denies the opportunity of following any links, unless the user goes into overdrive and prints all links found — different uses for different folks. Importantly, if your site is to be built from the ground up to deliver a particular service, keep the door open for other services, too.

4. *How will the site be managed? Or maintained?* This issue is often ignored by small businesses, specialist groups, and even associations. The mere achievement of the goal of 'creating a web site' is sometimes perceived to be the 'end-point' in website building. Nothing could be further from the truth! There are plenty of 'cobwebs' scattered across the world wide web falling into decay and disrepute. The overall management and maintenance of the site must be considered, and a strategy must be in place to ensure that what is placed on the web is kept fresh and relevant. No-one bothers to return to a site if it was last updated in 1997.

5. *Who or what will fund this activity?* Easily overlooked on a personal level, but a dangerous oversight if not properly researched, especially in a business sense. A business plan must be able to demonstrate the value of the construction and maintenance of a site. In the current economic climate, a clear demonstration of the savings that can be made by being online, or a quantified summary of the enhanced level of service that can be provided, or the returns in revenue expected, all need to be factored in. For information sites, the task is more difficult, especially if the reason for building a website is because 'everyone else has one'. Like billboard advertising, an increase in 'brand-awareness' or 'heightened credibility in the marketplace' is sometimes difficult to justify — though not impossible. ■