

17 Common Website Mistakes

And How to Avoid Them

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Many websites suffer from mistakes that can dramatically impact their effectiveness. We've compiled a list of the 17 common mistakes with helpful advice on how to avoid them. The mistakes listed below can be easily avoided. It is our hope that this list will help you to build the best possible site you can. Some of these problems merely result in irritation, while others will inhibit or prevent visitors from accessing the material or functionality that you have on your website.

No matter how well or how poorly your site is implemented, by far the largest mistake occurs when the website's role in the overall strategy of your organization has not been well thought through. Only once the strategic purposes and role of the site are understood can the site be built in a manner that achieves those objectives.

1. Lack of Accessibility

Accessibility refers to the ease with which a wide spectrum of users can access your site. On one level it can relate to the specialist web browsers that are used by people with a disability – a significant market in their own right. It also refers to the vast array of equipment, operating systems and browsers that are used to surf the web. Some examples to consider include: Visually impaired people surf too: Does the font size on your site increase if a visitor changes the text size from “medium” to “largest” in their browser? Does the page layout of your site fall apart when a visitor changes the text size? Small devices: What does your site look like when accessed from a PDA or mobile phone? How long does your page take to load at GPRS speeds? Other Operating Systems: Microsoft's Internet Explorer doesn't run on the Mac or Linux. How does your website design look on Opera, Safari or FireFox? Old Browsers: Believe it or not, there are still plenty of users running browsers that are 4 or 5 years old. A good website designer will take advantage of the formatting and presentation capabilities of the newer browsers, whilst “gracefully degrading” when viewed with an older version. Screen Sizes: There has been an explosion in the variety of screen sizes. Your site needs to be able to display appropriately on different sized screens, and it can't be assumed that the user will have their entire screen allocated to their browser.

2. Infrequently Asked Questions

Have you looked through an FAQ page and been irritated by the irrelevance of the questions? Have you wondered if the questions had ever been asked, let alone frequently? If so then you're not alone. Many sites no longer have FAQ pages and have instead updated their content to provide that information. However the point here is not so much about how fashionable the FAQ is or isn't - the point is that all of the content on your site needs to be relevant to the people who are likely to visit the site. Relevant content will give them a good impression and will increase the likelihood that they will take the next step towards becoming a customer.

3. Can't find contact information

We're constantly amazed by sites that make it difficult to find physical contact information. For small and medium businesses this is critical as your contact information provides a key link to reality, giving customers confidence that they are dealing with a real business rather than a scammer. Contact information should include conventional contact methods such as phone and your business address.

4. Click Here To Enter Site

Don't waste your home page with a “Click here to enter site” link or a gratuitous splash screen. Your website visitor is already here, so reward them immediately with useful, relevant content.

5. Audio

Audio should be used sparingly on any website and it should never be played automatically, especially if you are trying to reach users in a corporate setting. The best sites that use audio require the user to click a “play” icon. For

sites that need a voiceover, you will dramatically enhance your organization's image by having the track professionally recorded.

6. Too Much Flash

Flash is great when used sparingly and tastefully. Flash can add excitement and movement to your site, adding capabilities that are difficult or impossible using only HTML. Unfortunately it has two key detractors: not everyone has flash and not everyone has the bandwidth to support flash. If you have decided that it is appropriate to use a sizeable flash component on your site then make sure that the user receives visual feedback while it loads.

7. Too many meaningless graphics

The graphics on your site should enhance the user experience. This needs to be kept in balance – enough to ensure that the site is attractive and functional, but not enough to create clutter and slow down the user experience. Site graphics need to be optimized to ensure that the site is displayed at a respectable speed.

8. Search Engine Unfriendly

While having a search engine friendly site won't guarantee you high rankings on your favorite search engine (that's a discipline called Search Engine Optimization), there's no excuse for not having done the basics. These include having a site map, concise and relevant content, use of standard mark-up tags that are recognized by search engines as well as meta tags such as keywords and a description.

9. Welcome to Our Website

Commence your content with something a little more compelling than "Welcome to our website". Such an opening appears amateurish and communicates to a visitor that your site is in no hurry to provide them with useful information.

10. Poor Navigation

Navigating through your site should be intuitive. This means that the site navigation should be organized and presented in a manner consistent with accepted web navigation conventions. Stick to standard techniques and standard locations for navigation elements such as links and menus. Links should look like links. It should be easy for a visitor to find the "home" and "contact us" links. As well as having navigation elements that are easily recognized, it is important to think through the logical organization of your site. One useful metric to keep in mind is the average number of clicks required to find a piece of information or to access a page. Another key aspect is how easy/obvious is it for a visitor to find out which link to click on.

11. Poor Color Schemes

A poor color scheme will distract visitors from your message. At worst, the message will become unreadable. It is also important to keep vision impaired users in mind, so if your site features colored text on a colored background then it would be wise to offer a high contrast option. This can easily be done using style sheets.

12. Expecting that people will read your Web Pages

Very few people read an entire web page. They scan web pages looking for relevant information, zooming in on the elements that catch their interest. So it's important that your information be logically organized and easy to find on each page.

13. Pop-up Windows

Unless you have a very good reason, avoid pop-up windows. They are irritating and many browsers block them.

14. Dead Links

All of the links on your website should work. Broken links look unprofessional, cause frustration and undermine the confidence of visitors in your website and your business. All links on your site and especially links to external sites that are not under your control should be tested on a regular basis. Want an easy way to check the links automatically? Visit <http://validator.w3.org/checklink> and enter the URL of your website.

15. Requiring That Visitors Install Software

Generally, users will not want to install software to view content on your site. By default, most browsers block websites from installing software. Exceptions to this rule are some extensions/applications that have gained widespread acceptance such as Acrobat and Flash.

16. Pages that are slow to load

Web surfers are notoriously impatient and will punish slow sites by leaving them. A good site will load in no more than a few seconds. Reasons for slow loading pages often include such factors as overloading a site with pointless graphics, sub-optimal graphic formats and hosting factors such as using an overseas hosting company or a “backyard” hosting company. If there is a legitimate, unavoidable reason for having a slow site, then provide visual feedback for the visitor while it loads.

17. Not monitoring your site

There are numerous tools available for monitoring your site. They can provide valuable insights into the behavior of users on your site, allowing you to determine where they come from, how they found your site and the kind of content that they are interested in and which links are the most popular. With excellent tools available free of charge, there is no excuse not to monitor who is visiting your site and what they do once they arrive.

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