

7 Web mistakes to avoid

A Web site can be a powerful tool in a retailer's marketing and sales strategy. Don't let these common errors derail your success

BY WILLIAM J. LYNOTT

Deciding that your store would benefit by having its own Web site was the easy part. The tough part is avoiding the nasty pitfalls that make too many Web sites money losers instead of money makers.

The first commercial Web sites were designed by early computer experts. These hardy pioneers were quite comfortable in the arcane world of computers, but woefully lacking in communications and marketing skills. The result was a flood of clever Web sites that accomplished little except make their businesses look silly.

That's mostly over now. During the past few years, Web design has evolved into a sophisticated combination of art and science. Today's best sites are powerful marketing and communications tools.

Unfortunately, plenty of the old clunkers are still around. Worse, more are going up every day. Here's how you can make sure that your site — whether it's in the planning stage or is already a reality — isn't marred by one or more of the most damaging errors of Web site design:

1 Your Web site does not have a clear purpose

It may sound obvious, but failing to define and execute a clear purpose is one of the more common and most costly Web site design errors.

Do you want a Web site solely to establish an Internet presence, with a single page providing basic information such as phone numbers and a general description of your business? Or do you want a complete e-commerce site with multiple pages, photos of your store and products, a description of your specialized expertise, and other data? Or something in between these two extremes?

Why are you going to the trouble and

expense of creating a Web site? Precisely what do you want it to accomplish?

If you can't state your purpose clearly in a sentence or two, you're probably not ready to dip a toe in Internet waters.

2 You and your Web designer are not on the same page

If you hire a professional to create your site (and most store owners probably should), you'll pay additional charges if you keep exercising your right to change your mind. Changes in basic design after the project is under way can result in wasted creative hours. Unless your designer has agreed to a flat rate, you'll be stuck with a larger bill than you expected.

You can avoid this common error by taking time in advance to sit down with your designer and discuss your ideas. Sketching out layouts and text with paper and pencil can save hours of costly design time.

Don't allow yourself to become an obstacle to completion of the work by over-managing, but don't sit back and assume that you shouldn't be involved at all in the creative process. Either approach is a mistake.

3 Your Web site is all about cool images, animation and bright, flashing colors

Web surfers are looking for information about your business and the products and services you offer. Such details as site design elements and colors should always be transparent to the viewer. Too much "design" in a Web site can be compared with too much makeup. If it calls attention to itself, it has defeated its purpose.

A site cluttered with annoying gimmicks, such as animations and graphics that do nothing to enhance your message, will be a sure turnoff for most viewers.

Perhaps you've seen sites alive with dancing bears, cartoons, blinking banners, and other irrelevant devices. If you're like most Web surfers, you have little patience with that sort of nonsense. Such schemes may have a proper place on a high school student's Web page, but not on your business site.

Make sure that your designer understands how you feel about unnecessary distractions. Graphics that are primarily decorative in purpose should be kept to a minimum. In Web site design, less is more.

4 It's hard for customers to find what they're looking for on your Web site

You've probably visited sites that seem to be made up of nothing but menus. You keep clicking and clicking without ever arriving at the information you want.

Web surfers are notoriously impatient. Viewers of your site want to see what services and products you offer at a glance, and what they must do to find other key information. If your home page and your navigation system don't provide easy, fast answers, many viewers will quickly move on.

Every page on your site must provide an intuitive way to reach any other page, usually via a vertical or horizontal navigation menu. Internet viewers will not invest the time and effort needed to plow their way through a confusing maze of menus.

Whatever navigation system you choose, it must be consistent. At an absolute minimum, every page on your site should contain a link that returns the user to the site's home page.

Remember, if you allow your viewer to get confused, you've probably lost a potential customer. Your navigation system must provide your visitors with enough information to make easy and effective choices — no more, no less.

5 You don't have an e-mail link on your Web site

If your site is a full e-commerce site, this requirement may seem too obvious to mention. However, if it contains only basic information, such as phone numbers and a description of your store's products, it is easy to overlook the need to provide a feedback link.

Prospective customers may have questions that you haven't anticipated, or there may be problems with the site such as broken links. In either case, a quick and easy e-mail link will allow the viewer to reach you with the click of a mouse.

Caution: once you set up a feedback link, it is essential that you arrange to have your e-mail checked every day, and that you respond promptly to every message. Many people regard unanswered e-mail messages as a personal affront. That's not a good way to build your business image.

6 Your Web site takes a long time to load on an average computer

The short attention spans of most people today will cause them to move on quickly if your site takes more than a few seconds to appear on their screens.

Excessive use of large graphics, animations, and other devices that increase the file size of the pages on your site will

increase the time it takes for the page to appear on the viewer's screen. Many sites are elaborate creations with the potential to win design prizes from fellow professionals, but they accomplish little or nothing for the people who are paying the bills.

If you own a high-powered computer with a light-speed processor and a ton of memory, or if you have high-speed Internet access, don't use your own system to test your site's loading time. Find a friend with an average setup.

Then, if your site takes more than eight or 10 seconds to load, you and your designer need to sit down and decide what has to go.

7 You ignore search engine optimization (SEO)

Ignore search engine optimization at your own peril.

Internet search engines allow Web surfers to type in key words such as "model kits," "HO scale," a company name, or any other subject. Then, in the blink of an eye, the search engine scans the millions of sites on the Web and lists those that have meta-tags identical to the search term.

Meta-tags are simply words and phrases that describe the contents of your Web site and the nature of your business, making it easier for the search engines and interested viewers to find you.

Meta-tags aren't a magic key to site

effectiveness. However, they can increase the chances that your site will be included in the list that pops up when a Web surfer types in one of those words or phrases.

The use of meta-tags is a technical subject too complex to cover in full here. For our purposes, it is sufficient to say that you should discuss the matter with your Web designer to make certain that they include a full measure of appropriate tags in your home page.

If you'd like to learn more, log on to a search engine (there are many, but the most popular is www.google.com) and type in "meta-tags" (without the quotes). You'll learn how search engines work, and you'll get a long list of Web sites that can provide all you ever wanted to know about the subject.

Once you've checked out meta-tags, type in a general description of your business. The result will be an education on the creative opportunities and challenges that await you in designing your store's Web site.

Steering clear of these seven mistakes cannot guarantee a blue ribbon for design, but sticking to these guidelines will help increase the effectiveness of your Web site, and just may give your store that added push you've been looking for. ■

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4 GOLDEN RULES FOR ONLINE RETAILING

1 Have a call to action

Having people visit your site is obviously an important component to online success, but without clear direction visitors may browse your offerings and go someplace else to purchase. Be sure you ask your customers to take an action. Whether it is signing up for a newsletter or buying a product, it is important to state actions for your customers to take.

2 Know what your visitors are doing

Web site analytics are crucial, helping you make business decisions based on your customer's actions. Reporting is built into most e-commerce packages — Google offers world class analytics for free.

Use reporting to track how many pages your visitors go to; how much time they spend on your site; and what pages and products are viewed

most. Analyzing the data will help you make necessary improvements to generate more revenue.

3 Offer great customer service

It cannot be stressed enough, just like with your brick-and-mortar store: great customer service online is crucial to building your reputation and encouraging repeat sales.

Include your physical address, phone number and e-mail contact

information so customers feel secure. And above all, be timely in your communication with your online customers. In these times of instant feedback, people expect fast response and quick order confirmation.

4 Keep it simple

Having a Web presence is important for your customers to be able to conveniently learn about your company, review your

products and ultimately buy a product or service.

The best way to accomplish this is by keeping things simple and to the point. Well written descriptions, clear product photos and an easy checkout process will help your visitors become long-time customers.

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