

Introduction:

The First Rule:

More Dumb = More Work

Websites are great. Well, actually, they can be great. Done right, a website has the potential to bring huge number of people to what you have to say, show, or sell.

Trouble is, most folks don't know how to build a solid foundation for their websites - and it shows. The Internet and intranet (websites *inside* a company) are awash with websites that prove you can spend money, time, and effort and still end up with something that stinks.

Best Case:

You do a little up-front work and look smart.

Worst Case:

You waste resources and look dumb.

I don't know about you, but looking dumb in front of a potentially vast audience of web-surfers (one of whom might be Mom) isn't high on my list of things to do. Silly, I can live with. Dumb? Who needs that?

Building a website's foundation is easy once you know what you're doing. This book presents easily followed, step-by-step instructions that make designing your website a more logical and enjoyable experience.

You'll see how using a few simple steps maximizes effort, reduces confusion, and increases your chances looking smart.

Always keep in mind that each step in this process constricts the end result, which is the website. Knowing and remembering that going into the process makes you happier the further you go You'll apply much of the required creativity early in the game so it gets easier as you go. If what you're doing seems frustrating at first, it's because it is. Stay on task, keep at it, and you'll be rewarded as you move along.

1. Is It Needed?

One of my previous managers, when faced with the first glimmers of a potential problem, always said it was “too early to take a wait and see attitude.” Back then, I thought he was a doofus. I now realize that sort of mindset saves a person a whole mess of work.

People rush into website construction before they consider what’s best. Everyone seems to have a site and nobody seems to do much planning, but if everyone jumped of a cliff...

Before spending any great amount of time, effort, or money, it’s best to take at least a couple of hours and decide if you even *need* a website.

The very first question:

What is this website going to do for me?

Complete the following to find your answer.

Define Your Audience:

You would be astonished by website construction stories; sites out of control in time and costs, sites that don’t look like they’re supposed to, sites that never make it to the Internet at all. But the saddest stories deal with a lack of audience planning. Every site deserves an audience and every audience deserves a site.

You need to decide what audience you’re trying to reach and then build a site that appeals to them. Audience definition can be frustrating, but it’s a necessary first step. You need to know to whom you’re speaking before you know how to speak. “Punch the idiot in the nose” means the same as “Strike the blighter’s proboscis,” but they’re aimed at two completely different audiences. Get it wrong and your website (like your threat), is doomed from the start.

For example, this book is designed for folks who want simple, straightforward advice about building websites. There aren’t any flashy pictures or highly formatted pages. If the subject was designing and building poured concrete walls, you can bet it would be very different.

Take a moment to think about your potential audience. Don’t say “everybody” because that’s not true.

If you’re an established business, your audience is a mix of present and potential customers, and you already have a fair idea of who they are. If you’re starting up a business, the audience will be potential customers and they can be difficult to define. If you’re planning an intranet site, one used inside a business, the audience might be a department, a group of managers, or all of your co-workers.

The trick, then, is to design your website to fit your defined audience.

It doesn't matter who the audience is, as long as you remember a few basic rules:

Your website is you:

What's out there is a representation of you. If you want a wild and crazy image, make a wild and crazy site. If you're demure, do that. Be comfortable with the way you present yourself on-line. Like a business, it's all about the brand.

Stick with what works:

This is particularly true of a business steering present customers towards a website. Use established imagery to reinforce the image of who you are through your site. However, if your establish procedures stink, you need to revamp them for the website or all you'll get is stuff that stinks at the speed of a computer.

Take it easy on older visitors:

Not to stereotype, but folks above a certain age (like me) are distracted by the flash and glitz of extremely active websites. If you expect visitors with low levels of web experience (or low thresholds of aggravation) then avoid complicated structures. Don't make things overwhelming. There's a reason you don't see too many grannies in dirty books stores, y'know.

For any audience:

Remember that tastes change. What was trendy last year is now terribly out-of-date. Cutting-edge designs must be rebuilt on a regular basis to avoid looking un-cool. Classic designs last longer. Give viewers more than they need and package it the way they need it. Doing so makes it easier for them, and you.

This is as good a place as any to point out that the Internet is a *global community*. Different people bring a wide variety of experiences to your site. I am not now, nor will I ever, suggest sanitized political correctness. I am suggesting you keep the fact in mind.

Client-side Technology:

Think a bit on the type of technology your audience might have and design with that in mind. If your audience is made up of techno-freaks, then you can pretty much bet on them having better technology than the average person who surfs the Internet and mostly does email.

Consider what technology your audience will use to connect. Do you think it'll be good, old computers? Will a large portion be using tablets with limited screen size? How many will be using Internet-capable phones? The more complex the mix of technology used to view your site the more simple the site has to be. That is, of course, unless you're up for providing different versions of your pages for different viewing technologies.