

Designing your website



Highlands and Islands Enterprise
Iomairt na Gaidhealtachd 's nan Eilean

T: 01463 234171
E: hie.general@hient.co.uk
W: www.hie.co.uk

You can design your website yourself, using modern software that makes it no harder than using your familiar word processing software. You can hire a web design agency to do it for you. Or you can use a service that gives you a fixed-price deal for a set number of pages.

Whichever route you choose, this briefing will help you put together a more effective site. A second briefing, **Your website strategy**, explains the benefits and costs of having a website.

This briefing covers:

- Deciding what your website is for.
- Deciding whether to do it yourself.
- Organising and presenting your material.
- Maximising the site's impact.

1 What are your objectives?

First work out what objectives you aim to achieve with your site. Ideally, they should be SMART objectives — specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-limited (see **Planning your marketing**).

- 1.1 Who** are you trying to reach? For example, a roofing supplies company may target builders and architects rather than the general public.
- 1.2** When these people visit your site, **what action** do you want them to take? For example, register for a newsletter, email for more information, or place an order.
- 1.3** If you are intending to **increase sales**, what targets are you setting?

- How will you track this?
- 1.4** If you are intending to **save money** by cutting the cost of customer support, what targets are you setting?
- How will you track this?
- 1.5** What are the **constraints**?
- Keeping certain information away from competitors may be a vital consideration.

2 The three main options

- 2.1** You can choose the **do-it-yourself** route to creating a website.

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about the services available to you.

- If you use Word, you should find using software such as Microsoft FrontPage or Macromedia's Dreamweaver to create your own web pages, straightforward. You can even write in Word itself and then use the 'save as web page' command (available from Word 97 onwards).
- For about £400, you can buy pre-formatted software packages from companies such as Actinic (www.actinic.co.uk), that give you an online catalogue site, with shopping basket and credit card transaction facilities. You just have to enter your product details. Visit <http://hotwired.lycos.com/webmonkey> for tips on building and designing your own site.

2.2 You can appoint a **web design agency** to design and build an original site for you.

2.3 You can buy a fixed-price **starter package**, usually based on picking a layout style from a range of pre-designed templates.

3 Information to include

3.1 Start with **the essentials**.

- What is your product?
- Who do you sell to?

A package deal

Package deals, available from BT WebDesign and others, including some Business Links, can be attractive to newcomers to the web.

You can see exactly what you will get for your money, providing useful reassurance that you will not be ripped off.

Prices are usually fairly good value, but template-based sites can look dull.

- A** For £150, you might get **four pages**, chosen from four style templates.
- B** For £1,000, you might get **eight pages** and a more flexible approach, with the involvement of a designer.
 - You might add basic e-commerce facilities — with a virtual shopping basket, a secure checkout and email confirmation of each order — for around another £25 a month.
- C** Anyone spending **£2,000 or more** ought to be able to do better getting a site designed on the open market.

- Why should visitors buy from you?
- What are your prices?
Only omit price information if there is a good business reason to do so.

3.2 Provide the most **up-to-date information** you can.

- If real-time data is important in your business, link your site to a database for automatic updates.

3.3 Try to provide **something unexpected**.

- Can you supply a useful service over the web that was previously impossible?

3.4 Offer improved **after-sales support**, with tips, FAQs and local contact details.

3.5 Give customers a choice of **contact mechanisms** to get in touch with you.

- Include telephone and fax numbers and your email address.

People expect quick answers on the Internet. They will soon get impatient if they cannot find the key facts easily.

4 Make it simple

4.1 Keep pages **uncluttered**, for clarity and short downloading times.

- As a general rule, do not have more than about 250 words of text on a page.
- Always offer a text-only alternative, without pictures or graphics, for visitors looking for fast, factual information.

4.2 Do not display visitor **number counters** on your pages.

- A low figure looks embarrassing, while a high figure will not be believed.

4.3 Only use **techniques** that are appropriate.

- Complex animation, live video feeds, sound and large-scale interactive exercises are often just gimmicks. Only use them if they add something specific and relevant. Visitors may not have the hardware and software needed to enjoy them.

5 Organising your material

5.1 The web is a **dynamic** medium. Change and update your content often.

► For information on the use of web-type technology within your company see **Intranets**.

“Don't lose sight of the selling and marketing techniques you have learnt in traditional markets — such as putting impulse buys near the checkout. These ideas often work even better when applied on the Net.”
Gillian Roach, Internet.Works magazine

- Changes to your home page signal to repeat visitors that there is something new to see on your site.
- Keeping the site looking fresh is especially important in consumer markets.

5.2 Make people feel **welcome** the moment they arrive at your home page.

- People usually know what they are looking for when they go to a business website. Let

Navigation

Being able to see what is on a site and get around it quickly is important.

If moving around is slow, potential customers will feel they are wasting time and will quickly lose patience. It only takes a second to click away to somewhere more rewarding.

A Give visitors a **mechanism** that lets them go straight to the areas that interest them.

- Include an index, menu bar or set of navigation buttons on your home page.
- A site map can also be useful.

B Many sites benefit from having an internal **search form** on the home page, so that visitors can search by keywords.

- Software like FrontPage helps you produce search forms without any technical knowledge.

C Include navigation links to the **main areas** of your site from every page.

- As much as two thirds of the traffic on some sites comes in via 'the back door' and does not begin at the home page.
- Use text links as well as image links, for those browsing with 'images' turned off.

D 'Frames' allow the **menu bar** and other elements of the design to stay constantly in view. Different sections can be scrolled and moved independently.

But frames have serious disadvantages.

- Some browsers have problems handling frames, so you may lose visitors.
- Some search engines only index the first page of any framed site.

Quick access to the desired information is the goal. At the very least, it should be impossible for any visitor to get lost on your site.

them know quickly that they are in the right place.

- Give visitors immediate payoffs — news, offers, or key information they will want.
- Make it clear straight away what your proposition is.
- Show what the site offers, with 'trailers' for important pages and forthcoming attractions.

5.3 Make **regular customers** feel special.

- Use restricted areas to allow-business customers to enter a password and see appropriate prices and discounts.
- Provide an opportunity for regular buyers to record their details permanently, rather than having to enter them on every visit. You can use 'cookies', tiny text files that you place on the customer's own hard drive, to store this information. But make sure you state you are doing so in your website's privacy policy (see **Website and email law**).

5.4 If you are **selling online**, design your site to make it easy to buy.

- Anticipate queries and give clear answers.
- Illustrate your products clearly.
- Make order forms easy to find and fill in.
- Reassure nervous buyers with convincing customer testimonials.
- Provide secure facilities for credit card purchases.
- Offer buyers an alternative way to transmit card details. For example, provide a form they can print out, fill in and fax to you.
- Spell out the terms of a generous guarantee.
- Provide clear statements of your data privacy policy and your policy on goods returned and exchanged.
- If you are hoping to make sales overseas, give details of p&p or shipping costs and taxes that are likely to apply.
- To give customers added confidence, include a contact name, your company address and telephone number.

See **Trading on the Internet**.

5.5 **Grouping** different product ranges on different pages can make the bare data of 'page hits' statistics into valuable marketing information.

- You may sometimes get useful indications of customers' window shopping habits, as well as their purchases.

➔ For more information on legal issues and the Internet, see **Website and email law**.

“If you lack web expertise it is better to use an expert to design your site. There are plenty out there who are reasonably priced. Choose one who has been recommended, or who has worked on a website that you like.”

**Jenny Davison,
Arian Associates
Ltd**

“Make sure your website can be loaded quickly and easily navigated. If a page takes more than 15 seconds to load, the user tends to lose interest.”

**Kevin Davis,
Management
Consultant**

6 How to present it

6.1 Your site must reflect its **objectives**.

- A site that is selling must look and feel dynamic, to encourage visitors to act.
- If you aim to capture names and details of potential customers, offer an incentive to register. For example, a member's discount.

6.2 If you need visual material, use **images** from your brochure, scan in photos (saving them as jpegs) or take shots with a digital camera.

Check you have permission from the copyright holder to use graphics and photos.

- Generally, keep pictures small. If you must offer a big photo, use a thumbnail version and let people click it to see it enlarged.
- Once a picture has been downloaded from your site, it will be temporarily stored in the user's PC and can be re-used instantly on other pages, with no delay.

6.3 Make sure your website is **integrated** with your traditional marketing activities.

- Include references to your website in your brochures and traditional advertising, and refer to your brochure on your site.

6.4 Ensure your website complies with the **Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)** and be prepared to make reasonable adjustments to enable, or make it easier for disabled people to use the site. For DDA-related information, visit the Disability Rights Commission's website www.drc.org.uk.

7 Two-way connections

7.1 Make sure your site can be **found easily**.

- If you had to guess your company's web address, what would your first guess be? That or your product's generic name is the domain name you should register. See **Going online**.
- Keep the name short, preferably with only one element. If you have two words, people must guess if they are separated by a dot, a hyphen or an underscore – or just run together.
- Ensure the right keywords to help search engines find you are embedded in your site's page titles and 'meta tags'.

7.2 **Hotlinks** bring you visitors, but can also lead people away from your site.

- Include hotlinks to related sites, in return for links to yours.
- Keep tempting links off your home page. These links are better placed deeper into your site, when you have had a chance to put your main messages across.
- Alternatively, you can set up your links so that they open in a new window on your visitor's screen and do not take the visitor away from your page.

7.3 Include email **reply links** on every page.

- Replies are potential customers saying yes. You will miss business if they go to the office junior, instead of the sales manager.

7.4 **Involve visitors** to your site in doing something, rather than just looking.

- Set up a discussion forum and encourage customers to exchange tips and advice. An off-the-shelf package for this usually costs about £200, though there are also some free forum packages.
- Include a survey questionnaire. Customers like being asked for their opinions and you can choose the questions to give you useful feedback.

8 Test your site

8.1 Do not put any **material** on your website without checking it first.

- Check facts and spelling.
- Include a disclaimer if you have any doubt about the use visitors might make of information given in your site.
- Check all content for possible libels. What is on your website can potentially be seen anywhere in the world.
- Check that you have the right to use all the design elements, programming and pictures that form part of your site.

8.2 Do not **launch** your site until you know everything works.

- Check that it looks right on the screen. Ask colleagues to take a look as well.
- View the site at various screen resolutions.
- View and test your pages on all the major browsers that your customers may use, including Microsoft Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox, Opera and Safari.
- Check all internal and external links work.
- Print out every page in black and white. Check that the content is still readable.

Expert contributors

Thanks to **Kevin Davis** (management consultant, 01227 375533); **Mark Slade** (Fidler & Pepper solicitors, 01623 451111).

Further help

There are other Directors' Briefing titles that can help you. These briefings are referred to in the text by name, such as **Planning your marketing**.

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