

# 12 ESSENTIAL STEPS FOR SETTING UP YOUR WEBSITE

So, you've decided to set up a website to promote your business or organization. Congratulations!

Following are 12 essential steps to consider before getting started:

## 1. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE?

This question isn't meant in some big existential way, but just simply for you to determine your reason for having a website. Having a firm grasp of the site's purpose will keep your focus as you work through the rest of the process.

If you're running a business, most likely the reason for having a site is to sell products or services. So that may be the ultimate goal of the site. If you're running a non-profit association, it may be to disseminate information.

There are different levels of purpose. Though the *ultimate* goal may be to attract new clients, the short-term goal may simply be to have potential clients sign up for your newsletter so that you can establish a long-term relationship with them.

## 2. DETERMINE YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE

Who are you looking to attract in terms of new clients or providing information to? Initially you may think it's "everyone," but to be successful as a business on and off the web, you really need to focus on a defined demographic. For instance, you may be looking to provide therapy services to middle-aged

women. Or perhaps you're aiming to sell products to men aged 25-45. Or children. Knowing who you're directing your site to will go a long way in deciding what information will be presented and in what format.

If you have more than one demographic – e.g., maybe you provide therapy to senior women and to married couples. If that's the case, you'll need to appeal to both/all of those groups, which can be a bit trickier, but good to know up front.

### 3. KEYWORDS: THINKING ABOUT SEO

This piece may feel a bit intimidating to some. Search engine optimization (SEO) is the practice of making your website discoverable and rank well by Google and other search engines. You could have the greatest website there is, but if people can't find it, you're not likely to get many visitors.

While there are many components to consider in this area—some of which we'll discuss later—the first thing you need to think of is what someone looking for the services/products/information you offer would enter into a search. You should have several different search terms or phrases in mind, especially if your site is large, but try to keep them quite specific. For example, if you're an environmentally conscious architect in Vancouver, it's highly unlikely that someone doing a Google search just for “architect” will find your site among the thousands of architects throughout the world. But specific phrases such as “eco friendly architect Vancouver” or “sustainable architecture practices” or “LEED certified architect Vancouver” would be a achievable goals.

These search phrases should then be kept in mind while putting together the site, in particular while writing the copy.

## 4. SITE STRUCTURE

At this point, you'll want to start thinking about what information you have to present and (a) how to split that up into pages and (b) how those pages will be accessible. If you have a 5-6 page site, this may be fairly straightforward, but if you have hundreds of pages, it will be much more challenging and complex. With larger sites, you'll need to determine a hierarchy of information, having main sections, sub-sections, and perhaps levels below that. Keep the site visitor in mind in determining what will be easiest for them.

You'll also need to think about priorities. Even with smaller sites, you'll need to consider which information deserves "above the fold" placement on the home page or other front-and-centre treatment and how to order the items in your navigation menu.

All of this is best done with a sitemap, showing the site's architecture and the relation and connections of all pages. You'll also probably want to sketch out the home page, showing the placement of different blocks of information. There are many tools for doing these tasks or you can simply use good old pencil and paper. Make sure to have an eraser handy!

## 5. DIY OR HIRE AN EXPERT

You may want to make this determination earlier in the process. Regardless, the decision depends on how involved you want to be in "getting your hands" dirty, so to speak.

If you're the kind of person who likes to do everything yourself, then you can sign up for one of the many DIY website programs available. While these have come a long way in the past few years, there's still a learning curve and the quality of the end product will depend on your design and technical skills, to

some degree. For those who are braver, you can set up your own site from scratch, using a content management system (CMS), such as WordPress or even from hand-coding HTML, PHP, CSS, etc. It's really up to you to determine what your interest in doing this work is and what your time is worth.

The other option is to hire a professional web designer/developer. There are many of them out there, of course. If you do decide to go this route, make sure to find one that has a portfolio that matches your taste, a good number of positive reviews, and that you feel comfortable working with.

## 6. CONTENT ASSEMBLY

Now we start to get down to the nitty-gritty. You'll need to put together and sort out all the content you'll want to present in your website. For most sites, the biggest part of this is doing the copywriting, i.e., the text that appears on the pages. You may decide to hire a professional copywriter to help with this piece. A good one will know not only about spelling and grammar, but how best to write for the short attention spans that exist on the web and for your specific target audience. There really is an art to doing that properly.

Regardless of whether you hire a professional, you'll need to be involved in some capacity, at the very least to provide basic information for the writer to work from. If you decide to do all the writing yourself, make sure to have someone—again, preferably a professional—proofread your copy for typos, at the very least. The language on your pages is a reflection of you and your business.

If you're selling products on your website, you'll most certainly want to display images of those products. The content assembly stage is the time to collect and sort those images, in digital format (jpeg, etc.). Again, working with a professional—photographer, in this case—is highly recommended, as they'll

be able to present your wares in a, well, professional, manner. This can be the difference between making a sale or not.

## 7. DESIGN

This is what most people first think about when deciding to put together a website and it's often the "fun" part. However, it's usually best to take care of most, if not all, of the preceding steps before getting too deep into the design, as those steps will have a large impact and how the site will be laid out and how it looks overall.

Some of the main aspects to consider at this stage are: colours, fonts, and layout (where the various items on the pages are placed relative to one another). A good idea is to spend some time surfing the Net to get a sense of what appeals to you and what doesn't. See what your (successful) competitors' sites look like, but also look at other completely non-related sites, just to get some ideas.

Again, keep in mind your target audience. If you're promoting to senior-aged women, you're likely best off using subtler colours and larger fonts than if you were promoting to teenaged boys, for instance.

If you don't have a logo for your organization, consider whether you might require one. If you do need one, before or during this stage is a good time to talk to a designer about creating one for you.

## 8. BUILD

Depending on what you decided for #5, above, the website will need to be programmed or "built." Essentially this involves assembling all of the content, formatting and placing it according to the design, within web pages and

linking everything together. Sounds pretty simple but can take a fair bit of time and expertise to do this properly.

## 9. SEO

We touched on this in #3, above. If the copywriting was done well, with your target audience and keywords in mind, a big chunk of this work will already be done by now. There are other pieces to take care of at this stage: inputting page titles and description tags to tell search engines and humans what your pages are about, assigning “alt” attributes to images, interlinking pages within the site, and optimizing the download speed of your pages.

## 10. DOMAIN NAME

This is, simply, what someone enters into their web browser’s address bar to get to your site—e.g., [www.yourwebsite.com](http://www.yourwebsite.com).

There are several things to consider when choosing a domain name. You’ll likely want to include your—or your organization’s—name. Or you may want something more generic, including the industry you’re in. These days it’s difficult to find a short domain that hasn’t been taken, but try to find something that’s not too long, is meaningful, memorable, and easy to spell. You want to be able to say the domain name out loud and have someone else be able to remember it and easily type it in.

Although there are many domain extensions (the part that comes after the “dot”) available nowadays, if you can get a good “.com” domain name, that’s almost always your best option as that’s still what people are most familiar with. It’s almost assumed that your domain name ends with “.com” so keep that in mind. However, if the choice is between a long and/or complex domain

name ending in “.com” and a shorter/simpler one with another extension (e.g., “.ca”) you may want to go for the latter option.

And remember, you can register more than one domain name to point to the same website.

## 11. HOSTING

In order for your website to be available for viewing by the world at large, its files must be stored on a web server. You don't need to understand all the technical details of how exactly hosting works, but make sure to find a reputable hosting company that provides good service at a reasonable price. If you're unsure, ask friends or colleagues who they use and if they're happy with the service.

Most web hosts include a domain name and email accounts with their annual or monthly fees.

## 12. POST-LAUNCH

Once you've taken care of all of the above steps and have your new website fully put together, hosted, and launched to the public, what then?

In order to expedite getting the site indexed by search engines, you may want to submit a sitemap to Google and inform the other search engines that your site is now live. The indexing process may still take a couple weeks, but this can help speed things up.

To help with SEO, it's a good idea to see if you can get incoming links from external sites. These should be from reputable and/or related industry sites, otherwise they won't do much good. Professional associations you belong to

and other complementary businesses are often good sources of links to your site.

Also, let people know your site is out there—whether through an email campaign, social media, including your domain name on business cards, or print ads. Make sure people know.

Think about how you're going to keep the site fresh, in the long run, in order to keep visitors coming back. Posting regularly on a blog or adding informational articles are great ways to accomplish this. At the very least, make sure to keep existing content up-to-date—e.g., how long you've been in business, staff changes, new products/services, etc.

And, if your site is built in a CMS, such as WordPress, make sure all associated programs and files are kept up-to-date, in order to keep everything running smoothly and securely.



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