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Winning Websites

Visual appeal isn't the only element to consider. Creating a well-planned and organized website will win business.

In today's Internet-driven economy, your company's website can make or break your business. Even if your website isn't your primary interface with customers, having a content-rich site that's easy to navigate can deliver a clear competitive advantage in any industry. If optimally designed, your website can be a powerful customer magnet or, if it is not, a sure-fire customer repellent.

No matter what type of product you are offering, your website should be designed to engage users instantly, empowering them to find the information they need swiftly and easily so they do not go elsewhere, more than likely to one of your competitor's sites. So, as you embark on your next project, leverage the information compiled here to design a winning website that engages customers and stimulates business.

Build with a Mission and They Will Come

Gone are the days when you could slap brochure copy on a web page, kick back and count the hits. Simply having a website isn't a draw anymore. Luring target audiences to your site—and keeping them there—requires a clear mission. Is the purpose of your site to inform, give your corporate image a facelift, or generate online product sales? Before creating or revamping a site, you need to pinpoint your primary goal because site design, content and navigation must work together to support it.

For instance, if your site goal purely is informational, content should be comprehensive and organized in a manner that is logical to the user. If customers keep calling you for basic product information, your site isn't doing its job. If you're going for image, look and feel are key. A high-impact home page can differentiate you, giving users a strong sense of who you are as a company.

If your objective is online sales, site design should pull customers directly to the products area, entice them with an offer or two, then direct them to an online order form or "shopping cart" where they can complete a transaction on an SSL-secure server. If your goal is two-fold—providing product information and attracting new product dealers—design your site accordingly. (For example, a "For Dealers" section accessible via main navigation can offer dealer information and an online form for requesting more information about your program.)

Design a Usable Site and They'll Be Back

Think of your website as just another channel for communicating with your target audiences—one that instantly can engage prospective customers, while nurturing and strengthening existing customer relationships. Understanding how your visitors think, what piques interest and what influences decision-making will help ensure that they keep coming back to your site.

Ease of use may be the single most important factor. The way information is structured on your site, or "information architecture," should lead users step-by-step to their destination. Your home page should offer a directory of the site's content or "main navigation" (i.e., direct links to products, about us, news, etc.). Your company name and logo should be prominent here, and consider including top news items or special promotions. Also, ensure that main navigation is consistent throughout the site, so users don't stumble (i.e., a different navigation bar for each page will drive users nuts).

Recognize that delivering rich, usable site content is an ongoing effort—you're never done. Keeping content fresh, relevant and clearly written will help keep customers happy and loyal to your

site. For example, if one of your key audiences is manufacturers' representatives, maintaining current product specifications is an absolute necessity. If specs are outdated or difficult to find, annoyed reps may defect and head to your competitors' sites. Would you blame them?

Eliminate Life's Little Mysteries

If you want to drive customers crazy, bury your contact information deep within the site so they can't find it. Believe it or not, many companies do. No site should be without a "Contact Us" link on the home page, preferably in main navigation. No large website should be without its own search engine either. Regardless of how well content is organized, many users appreciate access to a site search function on the home page, in case they can't find what they're looking for.

A locator tool especially is handy for consumers who want to know where they can purchase your products, if not online. By selecting a state or typing a zip code, users should be able to obtain a list of local dealers or retailers, complete with contact information and, better yet, a map. Speaking of maps, your website should have one, too. A site map shouldn't just be a laundry list of what's on your site, which is how most end up. To add value, the map needs a "you are here" indicator; and ideally, it would highlight areas of interest to that particular user.

A list of frequently asked questions (FAQs) also is of value to users, who can become frustrated searching for answers to basic questions such as "what does your warranty cover?" FAQs reduce customer e-mail and call volumes, making everyone's life easier. You also should include an "About Us" page, accessible via main navigation because users are as curious about you as you

are about them.

Avoid the Five Most Common Website Pitfalls

Designing a flawless website is impossible. But designing a site that avoids these all-too-common "faux pas" can make it a more effective marketing tool—one that engages customers (rather than enrages them) while addressing your needs.

Losing sight of a site's purpose. A website with no mission is like a car with no transmission. It doesn't work. You need a definitive purpose to drive the key elements of the site (i.e., design, content and navigation). Stay on course; if something doesn't support the mission, ditch it.

Ignoring users by ignoring usability. If you're not thinking like your users when designing a site, you're not serving them well. Structure the site to reflect user tasks, provide consistent navigation and offer more than cut-and-paste marcom brochures as content. Make it functional, easy to scan and accessible in three clicks or fewer. Ensure speedy page downloads by limiting size (50K or less); keep response times to less than 10 seconds.

Not actively promoting your site. People won't hit your site if they don't know it's there. Submit your site to top search engines including Yahoo!, Lycos, NBCi and Excite. Also, don't forget up-and-comers such as Google and Ask Jeeves. Publish your site URL in marketing collateral, mailings and Yellow Pages ads; publish live site links in industry directories and on other websites. Track site traffic by source so you know what's working.

Letting site maintenance slide. Dead links can leave your website dead in the

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water. So can stale promotions and content. Think of your site as a living organism that requires constant attention. You need to diagnose and treat potential problems such as bad links and browser incompatibilities before users discover them. And, you need to diligently test all fixes and changes, such as new hyperlinks and pages.

Ignoring the competition. Don't. If you're not paying regular visits to competitors' websites, you're destined to lag behind. Believe it or not, you can learn something from your competition, whether it's how to (or how not to) configure an online store or enrich content and visuals. Stay on top of new developments on competitors' sites. You can bet they're watching yours. **WQP**

About the Author
Walt Denny is the president and owner of Walt Denny, Inc. Walt Denny, Inc. is an advertising/public relations agency that focuses primarily on home products clients such as Amerock Corp., Gerber Plumbing Fixtures and L.E. Johnson Products, Inc. Known as "The Home Products Agency," Walt Denny, Inc. was established in 1989, and may be visited at www.waltdenny.com

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