

# How to create a winning website

By Cheryl Rickman

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WebCritique: Fine tune your website <http://www.webcritique.co.uk>

To have a successful website, you need to tackle each area of creating it, bit by bit, block by block, tweaking it as you go until it's polished and ready to go live. Cheryl Rickman of WebCritique, looks at which areas to tackle and how to build a shining example of a good site.

Before you do anything

Deciding the purpose and objectives of your website are the first building blocks of the web creation process. This defines why you want a website, how it can benefit you and build your business, and what you aim to get from your site. Once you've made these key decisions, you can use them to guide your content, copy, design and functionality. Your objectives will also help you decide how much you want to spend on it, short term and long term.

As you brainstorm and write down your ideas and findings, also consider why your existing customers might use your website, rather than traditional methods. For example, is it faster, more accessible from home/work, offers more choice, cheaper prices, more convenient, and so on.

Also make a list (as long as you can make it) of the key things about your products, services and/or website that makes them special. What are the benefits? What are the end-results? What do you do faster/cheaper/better than your online and offline competitors? Use all this pre-site-creation information when you write your website headings, links, and promotional messages.

Research and get to know your competitors and customers

Before establishing a web presence, you need to be aware of what others are doing in your industry. So look at competitors websites and what they are offering. Look at what they are offering or not offering, that your customers want or need. List ways you can satisfy those needs on your website. Look for windows of opportunity and ways to differentiate your site from all the others on the worldwideweb. Is there anything that your competitors or your company is not offering that your prospects/customers want or need? How can you satisfy those needs on your website?

As you look at sites within your industry and marketplace, write down the strengths and weaknesses of each site and brainstorm words that characterise your company and your competitors'. This will help you design a site that has stronger offers than your competitors and that has a clearer site/brand identity.

To find out more about what's going on in your industry online, check out these resources:

<http://www.ecommercetimes.com>

<http://www.workz.com>

<http://www.fortune.com>  
<http://www.forbes.com>  
<http://www.nua.ie>  
<http://www.cyberatlas.com>

Knowing your online competitors is crucial to creating a good website, but even more important is knowing your visitors, customers and prospective customers.

- Define your target market and consider their interests and age groups, gender, location, business area, and so on. Although the web potentially provides you with a huge global audience, you will have more success by targeting a specific group of individuals, a niche target market.
- Put yourself in your customers' shoes. If you were them, where would you go on the web, to find the information and products you wanted? What online services would you use? What online publications would you read? If you can't do this, simply ask your existing customers via a survey, and reward them with a free report, for taking part. Write a list and visit these sites, then, once your site is up and running, you can make your presence (and web address) known there.

Creating a good site

Once you have researched and made plans and lists, condense your findings into a website plan.

Include the following:

- The objectives and purpose of your website
- Your competition
- Products/services
- Your USP and benefits list
- Packaging and price details
- Product positioning
- Target audience details
- Strategies for reaching that audience
- Mandatory inclusions: e.g. logo, address, e-mail, etc.
- How you expect your customers to contact you
- Customer service
- Delivery and fulfilment
- Your timescale
- Software and services budget
- Potential revenue streams.

Select an effective domain name (web address). The general rule is to keep it memorable and short, if possible. Unless your company name is very well known, you should consider other alternatives. For example, a training company might select:

Trainingsolutions.co.uk or Getskills.co.uk (if they're not already taken), a copywriting agency might select writeadvice.co.uk (sorry I've already got that one), rather than their company name. To get domain names (.co.uk) for £7.99 plus VAT I recommend <http://www.just-the-name.co.uk>

If you are designing the site yourself, subscribe to an internet magazine such as .net magazine or Internet Works. These provide great tutorials on website creation and development. Also visit:

<http://www.htmlgoodies.com/tutors/basic.html>  
<http://www.builder.com>  
<http://www.gettingstarted.net>  
<http://www.webmonkey.com>

If you are having your site designed by a design agency or freelancer, ensure that they follow and understand your brief and keep the site simple and uncluttered. Some designers these days are 'Flash animation' mad, and forget that, if your site takes more than 10 seconds to download, your

visitors will click away to a competitors site.

Recommended web designers:

<http://www.vivid-image.co.uk>

<http://www.taurus-graphics.net>

<http://www.businessincubator.co.uk>

### "Content is King"

Make no mistake, along with 'giving your visitors what they want including customer service' and 'making your site easy to use', content, and making your site "sticky" is still king. Your content must be fresh, informative, helpful, exciting and should make your visitors want to revisit again and again. Here are some tips on creating good content on your site:

- Write down the titles for each page and a paragraph that describes each topic covered on your site.
- Feature one or two 'specials' on your home page regularly. Web only offers, freebies or discounts can work well to pull offline customers to your site.
- Display an 'opt-in' box prominently on your home page. This will allow you to acquire your visitors' e-mail addresses, in exchange for good information. They submit their details to you, and you send them weekly or monthly e-mails keeping them up-to-date on special offers, industry news, etc.
- Consider building a community on your site, to allow your visitors to swap ideas, trade experiences and communicate.
- Keep all content fresh and updated.

### Design

The design of your site should make it easy to read and navigate and quick to download. These are the key elements to put before all others. If these principles aren't met, you're most probably doomed.

Design your site to provide enough information about your products and services, so potential customers can reach buying decisions easily. And include your contact e-mail on every page if you can, you need to compel visitors to take some kind of action: phoning you, e-mailing you, placing an order, or submitting their details to your opt-in list. Make it easy for them to do so. Avoid confusion at all costs.

Keep graphics to a minimum. Web users look first at text, then at photographs, then at graphics (according to a recent eye-tracking study in the USA). They also scan text, so make the site easy to read. Avoid dark backgrounds, and use plenty of white space. Also, avoid large blocks of text; instead use bulleted points, highlighted keywords and compelling headlines.

Consider having your website evaluated or tested before going live. You might want to try testing the site with a user group: a small community of your best existing customers who supply you with feedback. Alternatively, you can have it professionally appraised and get recommendations and rewritten copy by visiting <http://www.webcritique.co.uk>

### Getting visitors to your site

Remember, having a website doesn't necessarily mean that anyone will see it. You need to promote your site, both offline and online. Word-of-mouth is a good form of site promotion, so ensure your site is attractive enough, with enough useful content to make visitors want to tell their friends about it. Here are some low-cost tactics to raise the profile of your website:

Write and send out an e-zine (online newsletter) to your prospect list. Send this to visitors who have

'opted-in' to receive your e-zine or regular updates via e-mail. By sending out a monthly bulletin containing tips on your expert subject area (e.g. my e-zine contains internet marketing tips) you can keep in touch with your potential and existing customers, gain credibility, and build your prospect list. And all it costs is a little time, to write the e-zine, and the cost of sending the e-mail.

Include in your e-zine: useful tips, links to useful sites and resources relating to your topic, industry news, and so on. And always include an option to unsubscribe if they wish; your contact details; e-mail and web address; and a small ad or offer of your own for subscribers only. As your list grows, you can charge small amounts for classified text ads in the publication, and can automate the mailing process using software, such as Mailloop.

Create affiliate or reseller networks for your products or services. Let other websites do the marketing, referring and selling for you, while you simply fulfil the orders and shipping, and add customers to your database. You pay them a commission on each sale made via their personal affiliate site (a version of your site that is personalised to them, so you can track sales).

Visit: <http://www.cj.com>

<http://www.befree.com>

Promote web specials to your offline customers to get them to your site, for example, include an insert with your products or invoices saying 'visit <http://www.yourwebaddress.com> for information and to get 10% off your new purchase, when you order online'. Integration is very important as you encourage customers to use the web.

Use links and reciprocal linking strategies. This has a dual purpose of improving your link popularity with search engines and increasing your traffic. Submit your site by hand to the main search engines every few months. For more information visit:

<http://www.searchenginewatch.com>

Finally, in order to target correctly and improve your marketing messages, you need to find out what your customers and visitors want by getting to know them. Use surveys, feedback forms, e-mails, and so on. Visitors are what will make your website tick. Content, design, copy and good preparation are what will make your website sing.

Cheryl Rickman is author of 111 winning ways to promote your website and 127 insider ideas on creating a winning website. She is also the founder of WebCritique: <http://www.webcritique.co.uk> where she offers Website Appraisals, Cost-effective Online Marketing Plans, plus web page copywriting, editing and proofreading services.

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