Quick - Make us a Web Site

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You may find this hard to believe (then again, maybe not), but many organisations do not have an "Internet publisher". So when the firm decides to establish a web site, it is not unusual for senior staff to approach a variety of people including marketing, PR, publishing, secretaries with DTP skills, IT staff or librarians I've even heard of accountants, lawyers and salesmen being landed with the web site project.

The fact is producing a web site is a publishing undertaking; ideally, the project should be run by an Internet publisher, or someone with a publications background This will be easier, cheaper and more effective. If you can convince your company that this person should be hired in or contracted to run the project, that is the best outcome - but it may not be possible So I'm going to outline the steps to take, on the assumption you don't have a publishing person inhouse

Plan

To create a good web site you will need a good project plan. To prepare the plan, you need to ask some tough questions Do not continue until you have the answers from the relevant senior managers.

Write the plan using the answers to these questions.

1. Why have a web site?
The answer is often "because the Internet is there" or "we should have an Internet presence". This is like saying "We'll publish a book - because books exist". In the ASC's case, our answer was "to make our information more accessible to our stakeholders".

2. How will this help our clients?
The information can be:
1. more accessible;
2. cheaper;
3. searchable; or
4. quicker to access.

3. How will this help us?
Some possible benefits to your firm:
1. save on printing and distribution costs;
2. gain expertise with the technology;
3. reach a wider audience;
4. make more information available than via other media;
5. give quicker or wider access to people; and
6. make it easier to update

Some less convincing reasons:

1. it's glamorous;
2. everyone else is doing it.

4. Who is it for?

The answer to this is often "30 million people have access". To use the book analogy, it's like saying 15 million people in Australia can read, so therefore the audience is 15 million.

The real **existing** audience is:

1. Your current customers/ clients plus
2. People with an indirect interest,
3. Minus people who do not have direct Internet access.
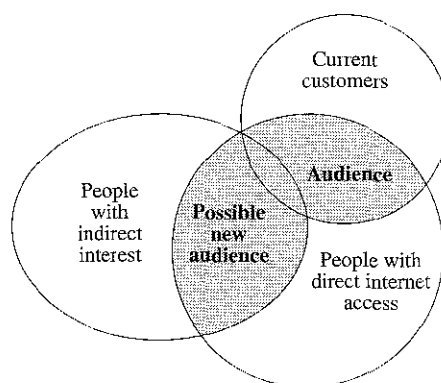
Creating new audiences

Some people will accidentally find your site Most of these will surf straight back out, just as people pick up a book in a bookshop and put it down again. These are not audience members.

But some people will investigate the site, which can generate awareness or even new business, depending on the quality of the site.

5. What will we publish?

If you decide to publish a web site, use the answers to the above questions to make preliminary decisions about what should go into it. Do a more detailed analysis when the project begins

For example, the ASC decided to focus on small to medium businesses and retail investors. In deciding what to publish, we considered:

1. existing materials for that audience (information sheets, brochures, annual reports, strategic plans, internal documents);
2. would those materials be suitable for reading online?
3. what else would they want to read?
4. what would secondary audiences want - are we prepared to address that audience now? and
5. how big did the first version of the site need to be (too big means an unmanageable project, too small means no one will return for a second look).

6. Budget

As a guide, a small basic text-only site can cost under $2000 if your editorial costs are inhouse around $10,000 - $20,000 for something more ambitious, and you can go much higher for a complex, large site.

7. Skills

Your team will require a mix of the following skills:

1. editorial;
2. writing;
3. programming;
4. design;
5. layout and flow of information through the site;
6. IT skills;
7. project management (preferably someone with publications experience);
8. research;
9. desktop publishing; and
10. marketing.

Case study: ASC web site

This is how it worked at the ASC (see **http://www.asc.gov.au**). Our site as first published consisted of 140 A4 pages of printed text This became 30 web "pages" (a page is one chunk of information), which makes it a reasonably big web site.

Project management

I was asked to manage the project, because I have a background in publishing and communications. I prepared a production schedule and project plan, did the higher level editorial work, commissioning, deciding what to include, getting copy, researching designers, tendering for designers, writing a design brief and hiring editors, some writing, some of the copy editing, some of the proofreading and checking, some of the research, some marketing, acted as the central liaison point, and kept the project on track. I spent about 200 hours on the initial project

Internet design/production

The design work was tendered to several Internet companies, and we chose one that offered a mix of strong design, technical production ability and Internet editorial skills. (This part of the project was not costed in hours but billed as a total amount.)

IT

An inhouse IT staff member spent about 10 hours providing technical advice, researching and recommending a service provider.

Admin

Inhouse staff provided some administrative assistance (file conversion, copy clean-up, photocopying) of about 16 hours.

Research

An inhouse librarian did considerable amounts of research online - around 40 hours

Editing and layout

I hired a small publishing firm with editorial and DTP staff to carry out the other editing work (copy editing, formatting, proofreading, checking, preparing disks etc) -around 100 hours

Marketing

Some marketing was done by the inhouse library staff (notifying online search engines, writing training materials etc - 12 hours), inhouse PR staff (media release, coordinating the launch across 8 cities, etc.) and inhouse IT staff (setting up Internet connections for the press launch in each region) - 50 hours. Additional marketing work was done by an external PR company

Time

Planning began in late November 1995, and we launched the site in early March 1996

Internet design

Who designs?

A common mistake is to have a non-professional designer to design the site. This sounds basic, but many people who wouldn't dream of thinking they could design a magazine seem to have no hesitation designing a web site. You can see the unimpressive results all over the net That's fine for someone's private have-fun web site, but not as a publishing exercise from your firm I strongly recommend that you buy this expertise from a company that has several very good existing web sites to show you

What does the designer do?

You can engage a designer/Internet company to do:

- graphic design work alone;

- design, structure plus html coding and layout; or

- everything from copy to final product.

Ensure you know exactly what the firm will provide before you begin. Current rates for designers range from $60 to over $130 per hour Contract the firm early, before you start to collect text

Planning the page

Image

Ask your senior managers what impression they want to give to the targeted audiences, and brief the designers about this. If you want an impression of "serious, important, well respected" your site should look very different from "approachable, friendly, easy to use". The designers should show you some choices for your design; choose the one that gives the impression you want to create. Show the design you recommend to the senior manager for sign-off. Last minute design changes are very expensive.

Interaction

Interactive features greatly enhance a web site. That is, the user can click on something and the site responds. This can range from links, database access, forms and animated figures to email response.

Graphics

Graphics make a web site exciting. But be careful that your graphics don't take a long time to download. Only use graphics if they add to your site's functionality. Internet users have a low tolerance for useless features, however pretty. Do not include photos of your staff. Only family and friends will be interested.

Discuss

Talk about structure and design with your Internet publisher/design team. Discuss your requirements, their requirements, timing, budget, content and likely structure of the site, and how they want the copy presented to them - do they want heading styles, paragraph marks, tabs, etc. Then amend your list of materials for inclusion if necessary.

Service provider

You will require an Internet service provider (ISP) to publish your web site, who can store and distribute the information. This is sometimes the same firm as the Internet designer/publisher. The ISP can be inhouse if you have an IT staff member with the required skills and a spare computer. More usually you will engage one. Shop around - your IT staff will know the right questions to ask (size of line, number of line drop outs, cost, etc.) Make sure you have a contract in place in advance.

Navigation

Navigation icons

Ensure that the site is easy to move around. For example, the ASC site has nine major sections plus the homepage. The navigation bar stays visible on the screen all the time (using Netscape 2.0 frames technology), and has nine signposts, one for each section. There's also a flag at the top which points to the homepage.

Structure
Users do not move around a site in a linear way. You must ensure that your site is logically structured. Make the pages that will be most useful the easiest to access. Do not assume the user has read any other part of the site besides the homepage

Break text up into chunks ("pages"). Do not make web pages very long. They take a very long time to download and are annoying to read on screen. The equivalent of up to five A4 printed pages is the limit for one web page. This means you need to lay out information flow paths for people to follow.

Under construction
Avoid having a page that says "this page is under construction". It will only irritate your readers.

Links
Include hypertext links within pages to cross reference to other parts of your site. Add plenty of links to external sites as appropriate, but confine most of them to one "links" page. Otherwise people will click on one, move out of your site and be distracted, never to return. You want to encourage people to explore the whole site. Do not make the link text "click here" - use something meaningful as the text for the link

Search engines
You can add a search engine to your site, from a basic search by keywords to a full text search.

User statistics
You will probably want to know how many people are visiting your site. Our service provider has included a user statistics button which allows us to count by page, domain, country etc.

Getting copy

Getting material (called "copy") is much like editing any other publication.

Commission
1. Ask people to write materials. Choose good writers who regularly write for publication over people who aren't as good at writing but know the subject. The good writers can research by asking the subject matter experts to provide materials or assistance

2. Give the authors a deadline that does not keep you awake at night worrying how you'll complete the project on time. Ensure your senior staff will back you up

3. Tip: if you make it "11am Friday" it's more effective than "Friday", for some odd reason.

4   Explain to the authors what you have to do with the copy once it's written (most people have little idea and think it's quick and easy)

5. Let the authors know how you want copy provided according to the discussion with your designers Also explain that they will get a look at the edited copy.

Reminders

6   A week before the deadline, send out charmingly polite reminders

7. The day before the deadline, send another reminder

8. The day of the deadline you will usually receive less than half the copy you are expecting This is completely normal (If you don't send out reminders, you will get practically nothing)

Chasing copy

9. The next day, begin chasing Begin with a polite phone call and ask "when can you get it to me?" It's best not to accept an answer that's more than one or two days away

10. If copy does not arrive by the agreed time, use one of the following tactics Tactic 1: personal visit to the person's office. Explain again why you need the copy, and ask "when can you do it by?"

11 Tactic 2: appeal to the person's boss (if appropriate)

12 Tactic 3: ask whether the person really is going to write it or not Say that's fine with you, but you just need to know so you can give it to someone else to write.

13. Tactic 4: write it yourself and give it to the "author" to check.

14 Tactic 5: drop the copy altogether

15 Tactic 6: get someone else to write it who is likely to do it quickly.

Writing

The homepage

While people are writing things for you, create some text and a table of contents for the homepage and some introductory text for the other pages Look at some web sites for examples The text should immediately state what the section is for, and should clearly identify the organisation

Do not begin your site with "our mission" (it's too boring to the user). Begin with the benefits of your site: "it'll give you info that can help you xx", "you can search our yyy database".

Imprint

Include details like those on a book's imprint page at the foot of every page in your site: your company's name, the title of the site, your web site address (URL), the date it was published, your company's address, your email address for feedback.

Style

Users expect Internet's written style to be very informal. Use short sentences, short words, short paragraphs and a "conversational" tone. Do not use jargon or abbreviations.

Research

You'll also need to research possible external links for inclusion, and any legislation that you need to be aware of (defamation, copyright, etc).

Editing and production

Files

Always keep a copy of the author's text separately from the file that you begin editing and formatting. That way you can always check what the original copy said. Keep your files for at least six months.

Time

If you are using professional editors and desktop publishing people, you should allow about 1.5 hours per A4 page of text. This includes commissioning, collecting copy, deciding structure, creating links, markup, copy editing, file conversion, formatting, cleanup, printing, and collecting files onto disk. If you aren't using editors, allow 4 hours per printed A4 page.

Formatting

Files should be consistent in layout and professionally presented. Any good desktop publishing person can do this step.

Copy editing

The text must be copy edited, and it is a good idea to hire a professional copy editor. I don't have room to detail all the things a copyedit should cover, but in brief they are: check for sense, spelling, grammar, consistency, style, tone, structure, accuracy, checking links, marking up etc. Expect to pay about $25 to $40 an hour for a freelance editor.

Author corrections

Once the copy is edited, give the author another look to check the copy for accuracy (not to change what they've written). Ensure that this takes no more than two days. A useful phrase here is "Please return corrections by 3pm Wednesday. If I don't hear from you by then, I'll assume you have no comments"

Proofreading

Never let the person who writes the copy do either the copy editing or the proofreading. Never let the person who edits the copy do the proofreading. This will reduce errors. You should also check the site online, including all links.

A professional proofreader is a good idea: you'd be amazed what they can pick up. A spell check on the computer is not enough. Expect to pay about $25-$40 an hour for a freelance proofreader.

Do the proofreading last. Once the copy has been edited and proofread it is now final. Do not let anyone change the copy. If you do, you will certainly introduce errors.

Marketing
You may want to consider buying in PR assistance if you don't have any on staff. Here are some strategies you can use:

- advise online search engines and link sites about your site (they don't want to know until it's published). A useful service is "Submit it", which advises a dozen of the major search engines for you (**http://www.submit-it.com/**)

- arrange for reciprocal links with related organisations

- advise computer publications

- write it up in your client newsletter

- publish something newsworthy on the site

- put out a press release, or hold a press conference

- hold a launch party for clients

- print business cards, stationery, newsletters etc with the address

Updating

Ensure you have a plan and resources for regular updates. Once the information is out of date it becomes an embarrassment rather than a banner flying for your firm. Check through the whole site regularly for minor things. (For example, have you mentioned staff members by name? Check staff changes.) If you don't include new information regularly, you will not get many return visits.

Good luck!
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