



5 Principles of Good Website Design

Learning the basics of good website design will save you numerous headaches, while also enhancing your ministry and expanding its outreach.

This whitepaper will give you **five overarching principles** and many practical tips for developing and maintaining a website that maximizes your business or ministry outreach. That's a whole lot better than the alternative, which would be a website that gives you innumerable headaches. Migraine headaches.

Good Web Design Principle #1:

Clarify your objectives to avoid conflicting voices.

Conflicting voices are a major headache that can lead to standstill, gridlock and internal strife. Webmasters are often pulled in numerous directions for no apparent reasons on unreasonable timetables. But clarifying your objectives will eliminate these headaches and bring into focus a crystal clear perspective for your team of why you want to have a website. In order to accomplish objective #1, you need to be able to answer the question...

What is the Primary Objective of Your Website?

- Is it a store for selling products? (www.amazon.com)
- Is it a site to generate leads? (www.pathmakermarketing.com/seoanalysis18.php)
- Is it for building community? (www.myface.com)
- Is it for serving your membership? (www.presidentialprayerteam.org)
- Is it for transmitting news or information? (www.crosswalk.com) (www.usatoday.com) (www.bbc.com)
- Is it for improving customer service? (www.walgreens.com)
- Is it a brochure about your ministry or outreach? (www.pioneers.com)

It's entirely possible that you may have multiple objectives. If that is the case, then further rank your priorities so that you understand which ones are the most important to achieve.

Practical Tip #1: If you have more than one website objective, reduce your list to your top 2-3 goals and prioritize them.

Focus on accomplishing your top priorities first, then progress to other subordinate objectives.

Practical Tip #2: Record your Website Objectives on paper.

Once you do this, if there are any changes in your website personnel, your new staffers will know the original thinking behind your site.

Good Web Design Principle #2:

Resolve the essentials to avoid wandering around nameless and homeless.

Like the television commercial that showed a married couple who had to take showers in public water fountains, not having a home is a major headache.

Can you imagine the headaches occurring in this crazy scenario?

What's your name, sir? "I don't know.

Where do you live, sir? "I don't know."

To accomplish Principle #2, every website needs an address, otherwise known as your Domain Name or URL. Examples of world-renowned domain names include: google.com, wikipedia.com, flickr.com, and yahoo.com.

Practical Tip #3: Choose a domain name that is your company name or brand, or default to the closest derivation, and get all the extensions.

First Choice:

- Pick your company name as your domain if possible. (www.generalmills.com)
- Pick your brand name as your domain if possible. (www.cheerios.com)
- Or select both a. and b., but **promote the one you go by publicly**. What people remember you by most is where they will attempt to go.

Second Choice: (derivations)

- Pick short domains over long ones, but memorable, pronounceable names over acronyms, *unless you go primarily by your acronym*.
www.firstchristianchurch.com is better than www.fcc.com unless you go by FCC, then get www.fcc.com. Better yet, get both.
- Consider hyphens as a backup or last resort option
www.first-christian-church.com
- Avoid plurals unless you can obtain the singular derivation.
- If you select a derivation like Mysite.com or TheSite.com be sure to advertise your site as such.

Third Choice: (considerations)

Ideally, find a domain where you can get all priority extensions. Be sure to get .com first, then .org or .net as backups (contextualize to your country).

If you plan to promote your .org then get .com as your backup. Picking up all extensions to a Domain gives you all entry options going forward (*many people may type one extension or another, but can still get to your site because you have them all*). **It also serves to eliminate your competition from snapping up the closest variation.**

Here's a good online reference for picking Domain Names:

<http://www.thesitewizard.com/archive/domainname.shtml>

To accomplish Principle #2, every website needs a host.

Your host will be the entity that “stores” the files that make up your site. Things like text, graphics, photos, etc. When someone views your site on the Internet, the host computer “serves up” your pages, based on the coding provided by the technical person who programs the site. Because they “serve up” the pages for people to view, your host computer is called a server.

Here are some online reference sources for finding a good hosting company:

<http://www.webhosting.info/webhosts/tophosts/global/>

<http://www.best-webhosting2007.com/>

<http://www.best-webhosting-2008.com/>

<http://www.tophosts.com/>

What’s critical to determine before you decide on a host is what kinds of features and attributes you want your website to contain. For example, do you need ecommerce, databases, email, etc?

Quick Rabbit Trail: Can you live with shared IPs or do you need dedicated IPs?

You need to know what an IP is, because if you intend to email your constituents, this is an important concept to you. IP is an acronym for Internet Protocol. Put simply, it is the numerical address of your website. More technically, it is the method by which data is transmitted from one computer (or host) to another over the Internet using a system of addresses and gateways.

The reason why it is important to you is that if you’re doing a lot of emailing from your IP, you could head into headache territory by sharing an IP with another entity that sends out spam. Your emails will also be considered spam in spite of the fact that you aren’t associated with the spammer.

Here’s a good article on the top 9 things to look for in a web host:

<http://www.tophosts.com/articles/000488.html>

Here’s a good article on the most commonly asked questions:

<http://www.tophosts.com/fag.html>

Good Web Design Principle #3:

Develop an attractive appearance so you overcome the “Not much to look at” criticism.

This is the original blind date fear — What’s this person going to look like? They might sound good on the phone but it’s a different story, if in person, looked like they just crawled out of a vacuum cleaner!

First impressions count for a lot, and a website that looks unprofessional is a tough headache to overcome. It reflects poorly on your entire organization.

By contrast, coordinating the important website puzzle pieces like Site Copy (or text), Graphics, Navigation, and Organization, you can create an appearance that is both attractive and memorable.

Great example: www.gmtiinfo.com

Practical Tip #4: Be careful to balance all your site ingredients.

Too much of any one thing can be bad, plus overuse of graphics, bells and whistles can cause your site to load slowly if they aren't optimized and coded appropriately.

Practical Tip #5: Make sure your site loads quickly.

A good rule of thumb to follow is that you have 3 seconds or less to get a visitor's attention. If the site takes too long to load, they'll move on and miss your message.

Practical Tip #6: Stick with what works rather than reinventing the wheel.

Major companies do research all the time on how people read web pages, how they go through the checkout process, how they use site navigation, and so on. You can benefit from this research without having to repeat it yourself. Preview what works for the major players like amazon.com, Google, Yahoo and others.

One example of this simple principle is that people expect the main site navigation – or links to the other major sections of the site – to be located on the left side vertically, or across the top horizontally.

Stick with one of these two approaches to site navigation, and visitors will find it easier to interact with your site.

Practical Tip #7: Keep colors to 2-3 complimentary choices.

Too many colors look tacky, and too few look unprofessional. Choose an appealing color palette and use shades of it to create the appearance of more colors and to keep colors from clashing.

Practical Tip #8: Choose fonts carefully.

There is only a limited range of fonts that will display online (in text) anyway, so stick with the basic fonts that work like Ariel, Verdana, Courier, Times New Roman, Geneva and Georgia.

Practical Tip #9: Plan for growth and avoid complexity.

If your homepage is over designed, you won't have any place to put important updates – and you should update your homepage regularly if you want people coming back. So, don't get boxed in to restrictive designs, nor develop endless sub-page designs.

Practical Tip #10: Begin with a clean, professional design for your home page and develop 3-4 sub-page variations that flow from the home page design.

Usually a relatively small amount of investment in this area can give you an enormous lift in appearance and professionalism.

Practical Tip #11: Stay relevant.

Make sure your text and images work together to tell your story succinctly and provide relevance to

your reader. Have a reason for all images, and make sure they communicate your message whether they are looked at with or without the text. Same with the text – make sure it tells the same story as the images. Don't use irrelevant images nor write irrelevant copy. You need both to be in harmony with one another to convey your most central messages.

Now let's look at some contrasting examples of good website design versus poor website design. I did a recent Google search for “homeless charities in New York” and I'm going to show you a sampling of what I found by browsing the results.

Good Site Design Examples:

<http://www.doe.org/default.cfm> and
<http://www.doe.org/help/> (nice use of photos and organization)
<http://www.evasvillage.org/about/> (simple but colorful, consistent)
<http://myfriendsplace.org/> (tight organization, good photo use)
<http://www.robinhood.org/index.cfm> (clean, colorful, nice flash)

Poor Site Design Examples:

<http://www.dacksgroup.org/> (looks homespun)
<http://www.thehopeprogram.org/> (looks incomplete)
<http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/donate/donate.html>
(way too much copy, home page is better)
<http://www.standupforkids.org/scontribute.htm> (incomplete)
<http://www.justneighbors.net/> (clean and simple but could be better)

Another Google search for “churches in Dallas” produced the following results.

Good Site Design Examples:

<http://www.watermark.org/default.asp>
<http://www.cccd.org/>
<http://dallasbible.org/index.php>

Poor Site Design Examples:

<http://www.orthodox.net/>
<http://www.tcoc.net/>
<http://www.centraluccdallas.org/>
<http://dfwchurch.org/modules/news/>
<http://www.churchofgoddfw.com/index.shtml>

Here's a good online reference as well for great church website design:

<http://www.greatchurchwebsites.org/>

Good Web Design Principle #4:

Develop a hard-working site to avoid the problems that occur when your website is all looks but no brains.

I don't know what your dating career was like – or is like – but did you ever go out with someone who was a knockout in appearance, but 15 minutes later you discovered his or her vocabulary was limited to

grunts and giggles? Many websites are like that too – all looks but no brains. And that’s a major headache! Here are some practical suggestions for creating a hard-working website.

Practical Tip #12: Develop an incentive based opt-in landing page to encourage people to sign up for your ministry e-newsletter.

For example, a well designed website will take into account the critical functionality required by your original objectives. It’s not just about looks, but about smarts as well. This refers in part to how well your site converts your visitors into useable assets, such as list, leads, gifts or sales. These are the names and addresses, both email and snail mail, of people who want to hear from you, or buy your products or support your ministry through gifts.

If you send emails to people who don’t want to hear from you, you’ve got big headaches in store for yourself. So ideally, everyone you deal with is someone who has opted-in to receiving something from you online: your e-newsletter, your free information, your products, etc.

Practical Tip #13: Develop an electronic welcome series via an auto-responder email system that immediately sends your lead the information they requested.

If your site is intended to generate leads, does it fully function in that capacity? If it does, it will allow people to interact with you by signing up for a newsletter or something else of value to them (not to you, to them). Your well-designed site will have easy-to-use pages that allow people to give you their contact information. These pages will do a good job of convincing the reader to give you that information.

Follow up this email reply with a packet of information dropped in the mail. Have someone make a telephone follow-up call as the last part of an efficient lead follow up system.

Practical Tip #14: Have your critical info appear above the fold so readers don’t have to scroll down to find them.

Finally, have a good database for holding these names and critical information about them – typically called “the back end.” And one of the most important and most overlooked aspects of generating leads is having a way for people to tell others about your site: add Tell a Friend functionality.

If the object of your site is to sell products, is your ecommerce easy to use and fully functional? Make sure all products have a photo and one sentence description. Make sure you have a good shopping cart system, and test it often to ensure that nothing has broken – so you lower shopping cart abandonment rates.

If your site is designed to generate memberships, does it accomplish that purpose well? It’s similar to name generation in terms of the need to convince people to fill out a form, but your site needs to have a community feel if you want people to become members. Even though it would be nice to believe people will automatically want to interact with you because of your wonderful products, services or outreach, they won’t. They need to know what’s in it for them, and it has to be easy and fun for them to come back to your site.

Practical Tip #15: Install an interactive way for people to communicate with you.

A church or ministry might want to install a Prayer Wall onto your site that your members can update

with prayer requests for various issues of the day or items specific to your ministry. Let the content be uploaded automatically but monitor it in case you need to remove anything inappropriate.

Good examples of this idea are here:

<http://www.presidentialprayerteam.net/comments/ann2007.php>

<http://www.presidentialprayerteam.net/comments/mem2007.php>

Here are some Hard-working Site Examples:

http://www.presidentialprayerteam.org/site/PageServer?pagename=pptnn_memsig_ppt (good effort at offering member benefits in exchange for name and email data. Thank You page offers a Welcome Kit in exchange for full address, phone)

<http://www.christianbook.com/> (easy to use ecommerce site)

<http://www.gcu.edu/gcu/> (getting leads by convincing you to sign up and providing the means all on one screen)

<http://www.eharmony.com> (excellent job of using the right images and simple text to get people to use a form and register)

Here are some Weak-working Site Examples:

<http://www.chicagoutreach.org/donations> (this donate page has no design, no call to action, no form)

<http://www.dreamcenter.org/> (Yikes! What is it this site wants me to do? It's so busy!)

Good Web Design Principle #5:

Fine-tune your image to overcome the mistake of maintaining the status quo.

Have you ever had friends who never seem to change, never seem to rise above themselves, never seem to grow, never improve? Quality improvements and dynamic enhancements will always out-trump maintaining the status quo, particularly online. We mentioned earlier that you should regularly change your site. You should update your site frequently (weekly or even daily) but no less than monthly, and you should consider a new design annually. You need to remember that the Internet is a dynamic place. You need to constantly update your site.

Practical Tip #16: Consider updating your site with articles, blogs, communities, and other ways for your constituents to interact with you.

Maintaining the status quo will give you a headache, as will updates for the sake of updates. Remember your strategy and objectives and put all updates through a litmus test of whether or not they achieve the objectives or fit squarely into the strategy.