Designing your website

When you are designing your website, what can go wrong?

As it turns out, there are many things that can go wrong! Ranging from your site designer's experience to your hosting service selection and everything in between including the website platform you will be using and your own knowledge of creating and running a website.

When you are putting together a new website, you may not have the time to tackle a bunch of things you do not even know exist. You can take on the role of Site Designer, the role of Site Administrator, the role of Content Editor, and the role of Hosting Service Account Manager by the time all is said and done. Whether or not you decide to step into each of these roles really comes down to your previous experience, how much are you willing to learn and how fast. If you do not take on any of these roles, then you need to find someone that can handle it competently for you and within whatever budget you have available.

Website Designer:

Starting with your selection of who is doing the actual designing of your site. This can be your biggest area of headaches if you have made the wrong choice.

Selecting a novice or one with just plain overall inexperience, your site designer can get you into a big barrel of trouble right from the start. This is not to say that there are no new site designers that are very good with the type of websites they do have some experience with – we all started off some place in this industry. When time is a factor in getting your website up and running you really do not have the time for learning what is needed be to known but don't yet and still meet your deadlines.

If you have found someone that has the skills to put together the type of website you want and need, then you both may benefit from the business arrangement. However, the question remains, "How do you find out if this person can get the job done for you?"

You need to take a close look at their previous work, visit the websites they have completed, review their own websites for the services they offer, see which website platforms they have experience with, check out which Social Media and other Third Party services they can incorporate into your website, and browse through their technical advice sections (also known as FAQ's, Self-Help, DIY, or Wiki references).

All of these are important overall, but some may be more important to you personally. As I have said before in other publications, "You should know as much about your designer and hosting service provider as you would your personal physician."

You also have to ask about their skills and methods employed to assemble the programming code for your website. The main thing here is that you can be guaranteed that there will be no 'unsavory coding' in your website. If this coding leaves your site vulnerable to hackers and others with malicious intent, a reputable hosting service can and will shut down your website if it falls into being in violation of your Terms of Service agreement with them.

Once you are satisfied with your selection of a website designer, then the next questions you should get the answers to are:
- Where will my new website be hosted?
- What platform will be used for my website?
- How reliable will the technical support be?

If you lean towards 'Do It Yourself', you're probably also curious about Hosting Services that have 'Site Builder' features. While these services and features are relatively easy to use, you still must ask yourself if it will get the job done that you want and need for your new website AND will it meet your future needs and wants. Remember to ask the same questions here as you would for your other options.

Where will my new website be hosted?

This is one of the more important decisions you will need to make though most people 'just go with crowd'. If your site designer has any experience in this area they will already have their own preference of which hosting service company to go with, hopefully based upon your needs and desires and not just their own.

The world of hosting services companies is very, very large indeed! Not all of them will provide you with what you may need for your website. Some of the more common things to look for are:

- How long have they been providing hosting services?
- Their track record for reliability – down-time percentages, response times for support inquires, hardware resources (server farms – how many and locations), back-bone connections to the internet, etc.
- What is their policy for keeping their software and hardware updated with current standards?
- What are their hosting plan costs and included services/features in the plans?
- What will your access to the remote server be (also known as C-Panel or Web Access Panel, File Manager, FTP)?
- What limitations do they impose for remote server storage, band-width usage, etc?

You may not need a full services provider for your website, but you should plan on selecting a hosting service that does include everything you will need and not 'nickel and dime' you for your business down the road. One way to ensure this is to check-out 'Hosting Cooperatives' – this where someone or an enterprise owns the account with the hosting service provider and shares their account with you, usually for a portion of the overall cost of owning the account hosting account.

Within a Hosting Cooperative

There are usually additional rules and policies to be followed in addition to the actual hosting service provider's rules and policies. Be sure to read through any Terms of Service (TOS) agreements from the Cooperative and the Hosting Service Provider – a reputable provider of these services will provide this information to you on their website. The intent of these TOS's is not only to protect the service providers from any potential conflicts or misunderstandings but also to spell out what you, as their client, can expect from them.

A reputable Cooperative Hosting provider will also have in place procedures to protect each client individually from their other clients' actions. In other words, only you will have access to your site's files and resources required to run your site with the exception of the Cooperative's Administrator in order to maintain certain controls over the account and to provide assistance to the client when needed.

One advantage of using a Hosting Cooperative is that usually you can have to your site hosted with a Full Services provider for a lot less than having the equivalent account on your own. Another advantage is that a reputable Cooperative's Administrator should have a more extensive experience with the services being provided by the Hosting Service and can ensure that you are getting everything you need to run your site the way you want it to be.

Website Platform

Where to begin telling you about this issue? This can be such a complicated topic that can include pages and pages describing the history of website design and how things work now compared to how they worked just five years ago.

The 'Short' version is simply that you do have several options for your site's platform and within each of the options are several major options to select even before you can get your site online anywhere.

Static Web Pages:

The longest existing platform option is what is known as **Standard HTML**. In this platform all of your web pages are 'Static', meaning every line of the page's coding already exists when a site visitor clicks on the link to the web page and does not change for every subsequent visit to that page. While there are some elements that can change because of certain 'tricks of the trade' programming, in general things will be exactly the same for each visit to the web page – in other words, the page is already assembled and ready to download for display in the site visitor's web browser.

Unless you are educated in the programming languages to create the web pages you will mostly have to employ the use of a WYSIWYG program to create the web pages. Many people have heard of these through the years and they include Adobe's Dreamweaver, Microsoft's FrontPage and Expression Web, and others. Basically these are graphical user interfaces that allow you to see the end results as you are working on them, hence the 'What You See Is What You Get' acronym of *WYSIWYG*. While some of these are affordable to purchase (or free), the time it takes to learn how to use it can be something you may not have available to meet your deadlines.

Dynamic Web Pages:

As opposed to the Standard HTML platform, there are **CMS** (*Content Management System*) platforms. The web pages in the CMS platform are what are known as 'Dynamic', meaning each web page is assembled each time a site visitor clicks on the link to the page. With employment of 'Cookies' each site visitor could be shown different web page content than any other site visitor, basically tailored specifically for them.

How are Dynamic web pages created? Through the use of coding, web page elements are called upon to be created using various files stored on the hosting server remote computer each time a web page is visited. Specific content is usually organized into selected folders for images and text / settings configuration items are usually stored in a Database file on the remote server. The appropriate items are called up, assembled into their assigned locations, and then the results are sent to the site visitor's web browser for display. While this sounds like it could be a rather slow process, in reality it all happens in less than a blink of an eye usually only slowed down by the site visitor's connection speed to the internet.

Within the CMS Platform option, you have several popular choices to select from. Probably the most well known is the *WordPress* platform. However, depending upon your needs, there are other CMS Platforms that may be a better choice for your web site. One such choice is *Joomla!*

While both CMS platforms are similar in the way they work, each has certain advantages over the other. Your site designer should be familiar enough with both to make the appropriate recommendation to you. Many of the differences between the two platforms have to do with your intended content for your site, though with recent developments in both platforms those differences have become almost a non-issue.

You can read more about these two CMS Platforms on our website www.ParnassusCreative.com in the Website Services section.

How reliable will the technical support be?

Wow! This could be your biggest area of concern. Either you have it or you don't.

If your actual hosting service isn't able to provide the technical support required for their services then you have unfortunately made a bad choice and you should be seriously considering changing your hosting service. Hopefully, your website designer will be able to fill in the gaps in this area but again if not then you might have made the wrong decision for your website for this vital element as well.

When 'shopping' for your website designer and hosting service they should be able to provide answers to you on how reliable their technical support is going to be for you, show you how to get answers to technical questions, and provide you with any training you may need to administrate your website without having to have your website designer on 'speed dial' to bail you out when you get in over your head on something.

You may not need much for yourself in the way of technical support, but for those times that you do need it don't you want to already know it will be there?

Touching more on the subject of your website's coding:

No matter the platform for your website, the methods employed to create the coding for your website can be another area of failure preventing you from having a successful website.

If you or your website designers are using a WYSIWYG program to assemble your web pages' coding, then you are probably good to go for the most part. You will need to be vigilant for any 'Third Party' coding and custom coding to be included ensuring they do not harbor anything you don't want such as back-links to the developer's website or, heaven forbid, malicious coding allowing hackers to use the resources of your hosting service without your knowledge.

As an example, recently I was asked to consult on a Word Press platform site where the site designer had either used some coding they obtained from questionable sources or just didn't know enough about security settings in the site's coding. This left the site open to a hacker who then high-jacked some of the site's resources to begin a spam email campaign. The actual hosting service while performing their normal security monitoring of their resources discovered the spam email campaign, looked into the site's program coding and shut down the site immediately as being in violation of their Terms of Service policy. The site basically had to be reconstructed from scratch so that the offending coding was no longer present and the security settings were properly configured. This has cost the site owner both money and time having to repair their site to get it back online. The original site designer was at fault for this episode, but his recommendation to the site owner was not to weed out the offending coding but rather to change to another hosting service that doesn't take such drastic action to protect their resources.

Yes, all of it sounds like more trouble than you might expect. It will be up to you to remain vigilant for the potential pitfalls described here regardless of your selections for a site designer and hosting service.

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