

Web sales – creating and developing an online presence

In the second part of this feature, **Stuart Jackson** outlines the preparatory steps that will lead to a successful website project.

Contracting a designer

Many retailers have been caught out over an ownership issue with websites. Without a written agreement to the contrary, elements of the website can through copyright, remain the property of the designer.

It is, therefore, critical to safeguard ownership of the website and all its components via a contract that stipulates rights to such items as the programming code, domain name, graphics, artwork, pictures, text and files are assigned by the designer to the retailer upon payment.

Such an agreement could also incorporate aspects such as payment arrangements, a definition of the completed task, any checks and trial periods, responsibility for correction of errors, ongoing maintenance, search engine ranking aims, project handover steps and as many other points of possible contention as can be predicted.

Beginning your website

Essential to settling on an appropriate designer is a decision on the source of your website software. It can be an “off the shelf” third party branded product, a bespoke design or software obtained from “open source” (an alternative to branded products).



Off the shelf...

Is a pre-designed piece of software prepared and marketed by a specialist company to fulfil your internet site needs. It is similar in principle to purchasing any other piece of software for a specific purpose such as Sage for accounting.

A branded package has the advantage of being tried and tested and will be supported by the provider. Its simplified template structure permits the “front end” to be personalised in name, image and content although each company’s unique data will be presented in the same pre-ordained format.

Functionality is assured and costs are fixed to the complexity of software required. Key influencing factors on price

are the quantity of products to be loaded, the consumer and management reporting services desired and maintenance cover.

Amongst the disadvantages are that features and functionality are limited by the standard packages on offer and updates or improvements are in the hands of the manufacturer. Since templates are used, your website will look the same as many others thereby removing the ability to compete through innovation.

Bespoke design

This is where a private individual or company is contracted to build the website from scratch using their own programming code or based upon “open source” (more later). The advantage is that

the website is designed to incorporate your individual look, features and functionality while changes and updates can be incorporated swiftly.

On the negative side, the retailer must command or employ a high level of information technology expertise or there is a strong possibility that a bespoke design will either fail to deliver on its promises or cost the earth to complete and maintain.

There is no doubt that website ignorance combined with a poor design contract has cost many retailers more than £10,000 for simple websites that do not perform. Trust in or control of the designer is of paramount importance.

Open source...

Is software fashioned by a network of programmers who believe in sharing and freedom of use to copy, alter, build onto and redistribute each other’s work.

A web designer using open source would locate a piece of web shop software already written and freely available to download. The designer might then add to or change the code already written, bolting on additional features that the retailer requires.

The main advantage of open source is its cost; there is none other than those attached to the designer locating and tweaking the free and pre-written software

for use. Beware an individual charging you for a bespoke design when it is in fact based on software obtained this way.

The main disadvantages tend to be that the software, in not originating from a branded company such as Microsoft, can have compatibility issues with other programmes. It also has a similar disadvantage to an "off the shelf" product in that it is a limited predetermined design, perhaps even much "rawer" in functionality and look than paid-for alternatives.

Although the software can be altered and added to, it can sometimes be a complicated exercise for a designer to comprehend, utilise and modify another programmer's source code.

Standards

The internet is no different from any industry in that there are trade bodies that supply standards and certification.

Most pages on the world wide web are written in computer languages (such

as HTML) that allow web authors to structure text, add multimedia content, and specify what appearance or style the result should have. As with any language, these have their own grammar, vocabulary and syntax and every web page is supposed to follow such rules.

Validation compares your HTML document to the defined syntax of HTML and reports any discrepancies. Validation does not reflect quality, it merely confirms that a page complies with a specific set of rules and in doing so it is permitted to display the certifier's logo.

Apart from being "good practice", search engines and other web browsers rate your website partly on its conformity to standards so ensure that any contracted designer has this covered.

Website image

The website is like a traditional manual brochure and should reflect the manner in which you want the business to be perceived by the consumer.

For example, it could be funky and friendly such as www.innocentdrinks.co.uk or serious like www.goldshield.co.uk.

Consider both the target customer you are attempting to connect with and the message the business wants to convey. Some basic considerations might be the colour scheme, logos, marketing straplines, whether the site is "busy" with information or kept simple and whether language should be formal or casual.

The home page

This is the portal through which visitors enter and navigate the website. It is the most crucial page to design well as the messages it contains and the subjects listed as tabs to click on will determine a visitor's next action.

Since each subpage of the website must feed through from

a home page click, those tabs will dictate the content of the entire website.

Key decisions for the homepage are the welcome text, any sales and health messages and then offering a choice of services via a tab click.

Tabs worth considering are for online shop, health news, a help facility, about us, log in or become a member, visitor comments, information links, online health advice, contact us and a search facility.

Core message

Thorough preparation will ensure that the site is legally the property of the retailer and will be built cost effectively to worldwide standards. Its well thought through homepage will then succeed in serving the customers' needs while ensuring that the rest of the site has all the relevant content. **HFB**



If you have any questions for Talking Shop or would like further information on Stuart Jackson's consultancy service, contact him on 0131 315 0303 or email stuart@forceofnature.co.uk or visit www.forceofnature.co.uk

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