FREE WEBSITE CHECKLIST

DON'T PLAN YOUR NEW WEBSITE WITHOUT READING THIS

Useful Website Briefing Checklist

The below is meant to be a helpful checklist. It's by no means exhaustive for every site, and for other business start-up sites, it's more than enough. Judge what's right for your website.

The most important thing is to be clear about the questions I ask below before you ever approach or decide on a developer. Get what you want down on paper. This will help the web developer or designer to understand and quote for the job properly. It will also ensure both of you are on the same page, avoiding misunderstandings at a later, crucial stage. I find a checklist works well for SMEs who don't always know the questions they need to be asking either themselves or the developer.

Background Information

- Is it a new or replacement site?
- If replacement;
    - What is the current domain (URL) and passwords:
    - Do you require staging site during build?
    - What's the motivation for website change?
    - If a rebuild of the current site is required – what do you like /dislike about the current site?

Goals

- Be clear about the desired outcomes of the project? What do you want the website to do? To generate leads via contact forms? Make the phone ring? Give extra or back-up information? Get signups to a newsletter?

- Goals should be SMART if possible: specific, measurable, achievable, and realistic and have a timeframe.

Audience

- Who is the audience? Do you have an ideal customer profile? Be as clear as possible here. The 'e*veryone is my target*' approach only serves to reduce your chance to convert your best prospects, not increase them. You need to design messages, content, products and services that serve this core target best. Appeal to your core target and the revenue will follow.
- Have you a secondary audience? Is your audience different from your customer? (for example a band might want to appeal to fans as well as to producers, non-profits may target donations and a second audience might be sponsors)
- Does your business have a male/female bias? Is there a geographic focus; city or country target? Is there an age range? Are there shared interests or dislikes within this target segment? Get this description down on paper, this will be your target customer and very useful to third parties you may work with. Everyone from logo designers, web developers to external consultants.
- How will they use the website?
- How will they hear about your website? (articles/ reviews/ contact details/pricing?) Do you have a marketing plan? The saying '*Build it and they will come'* does not apply to new websites.

Content

- What content will be needed for the site? Draw up a plan for each page. At a very basic level you need
    - A 'home' page, with important key messages.
    - 'About us' page; one of the most important, visited and overlooked pages on a website! It's the history of the 'When', the 'Why' and the all-important 'Who' of the business set-up. It's important to give some sense to the visitor of who you are and what you are about. Read more about effective business storytelling here.
    - 'What you do' – A short succinct summary, with products/services offered. What your business does as well as the problems you solve. See suggested P. A. L approach to this below.
    - 'Contact us' page. Put in all the details. Have a business-like email address, preferably related to your domain name. Don't just have contact form, give emails it might be preferable to some enquirers. Have you a landline as well as a mobile? Looks better and a preferred method of contact for some. Have you an office or at least a virtual office address? This is all part of your business branding.
- List the total subject areas you might cover –
    - From most important to least, focus on topics and clusters (which can then become the site map). Have you research on the market? What are people discussing about your business category? What questions are they asking

- o Will site be designed with Search Engine Optimisation (i.e. ease of being found on search engines) in mind? See SEO section below.
- Is there content available to tell the story (photos, videos, text, diagrams, etc.). What content/images/logo/video already exists and what needs to be developed? Read more about how to use tools and techniques to support your online business storytelling [here](#).
- Who is going to write the content?
- Scope – will the site be expanding vastly or piecemeal in the future and is there a vision for this yet by the owner?
- How is content to be maintained after the launch? Will the developer train the business owner how to make changes to text/images/page?
- Are page layout and changes charged by the hour by the developer? If so, what's the rate?

Communication & Messages

I am splitting this out from content section as it is so important and often overlooked. What should the site communicate?

- What are the primary objectives for the site? There will be a lot of things that an owner/manager wants to communicate on a site but what are the key messages or prioritisation of messages?
- What should visitors of the site come away with?
- What are your headings? Sections?
- There are a number of approaches to messaging that I use. The easiest one I use is the P.A.L. approach (Pain, Aspirin, Legacy). Here is [a link to a video](#) which explains this here. If you want more information on Business Storytelling online [I talk about in more detail here.](#)

Search Engine Optimisation and SEO

- o Is SEO or 'being found easily on the search engines' required? If not why? There's no point in having a website if it can't be found.
- o SEO keyword research is hugely important as it affects what sections, pages and titles/headings you will have on your site. There were a lot of SEO tricks in the past – and still used today - where site content was written purely to be found by search engines like Google. Best not to do this. Write your content for your audience, what problems they have or services they need. Keep SEO strongly in mind, but don't let SEO drive your content completely as you will lose the interest and attention of your targets. A key metric in tracking your engagement from Google Analytics is how long visitors are spending on your site and of course how many lead to sign ups/enquiries/sales/downloads. Visits are vanity if they don't lead to sales.
- o You need to understand how Google searches work, what SEO is all about and how to make it work to generate traffic for you.
- o You need a Gmail account first.
- o Knowing your keywords and how to use [Google's Keyword Planner tool](#) is important.

- You should be able to see what *search terms or keywords* that your target market is using to look for services in the regions you are checking. Examples of keywords used in Google searches are "web designer Galway" or "personalised baby gifts"or "hairdresser in Swords", or "affordable marketing advice SME" or "emergency plumber Cork".
- You should also be able to see how searches are made on Google using these words and how 'competitive' these terms are (i.e. if many or few businesses are trying to get their websites to rank highly on Google for those exact terms.)
- NOTE: A decent designer/developer should be able to give you some basic pointers here. If this is not an agreed part to your brief, you need to educate yourself before you start the job. More detailed SEO work may require an SEO specialist but this isn't usually required for a modest online website launch. It is also noteworthy that You Tube contain lots of educational videos 'how to' videos on Google Keyword Planner and WordPress SEO if you ever need additional support.
- Have you considered the SEO implications of your domain name? Eg are you choosing a name for your domain that sounds good or that will help you get found? There's no hard and fast rules – for example I chose www.inspiredthinking.ie but names like webdesigndublin.ie or physio.ie do support overall SEO goals.
- Do you need a WordPress SEO plug-in? WordPress have reasonably priced 'All in One SEO plugin' for approx. under $50 which should be given serious consideration. This means you can optimise the site yourself with some basic training from the developer.
- How is the success of this keyword research and optimisation (SEO) measured after the website build ? Will you as owner be able to track using Google Analytics? Will the designer install this for you? Is there a charge?

Features required

- Downloads – do you want to enable documents or slides to be downloaded when someone enters their email address, for example?
- Is a 'Contact us' form required?
- Do you want to have a blog that feeds new blog postings onto home page?
- Do you want to collect email addresses in exchange for a presentation download?
- Do you require Google Analytics to be set up?
- E-commerce
  - Do you require payment online? Eg Paypal, Visa.
  - Have you investigated the various shopping cart options, open cart, zen cart and do you know independently the pros and cons of those you have shortlisted? Do your research at this stage. Losing a customer due to poor shopping cart experience is both common and reckless! It takes so much marketing effort to get them to this point.
  - Other e-commerce capabilities incl. a sub-set of specific features, i.e. having specials, discounts, featured products, customer reviews, etc.).

- Do you want a blog section? What will you blog about? Again refer to SEO and keyword planning.
- Is there a members-only content area? (paid or free)
- Do you want advertisers or sponsors?

Call to Action

- What do you want people to do when they get to the site? Buy from the shop / complete enquiry form /call / read lots of articles / sign-up to the newsletter/ RSS/ Go to Facebook and like page?
- What are the 2 most important calls to action that will be on the home page?

Social Media and Sharing

- Where do your target audience(s) spend time online? What social networks?
- What links do you need for sharing your content (links on the site or blogs to LinkedIn, Google+, Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- What Social Media presence do you have (or need) – and how is that going to be presented on the site (Will you use Social Media Widgets to show Facebook Like box, Follow us on Twitter, or include the latest updates from your social media streams etc.).

Look and feel/Design Assets

- Logos, colours, style guide, existing marketing materials
- Is there 'a look' or design that the owner is going for? Can other websites be referenced to give the designer an idea?
- Could the web developer show the owner a selection of the pre-designed WordPress templates that he/she would recommend so the owner can choose? Some examples of good WordPress templates are here;

http://www.tripwiremagazine.com/2013/02/twitter-bootstrap-templates.html#SiteTemplates

http://www.thinkthe.me/articles/20-modern-one-page-wordpress-themes/

- Some of the most unprofessional sites I've seen have a mish-mash of font types and colours. With pre-designed templates these days, your website doesn't need to rely so heavily on the design skills of your designer.
- Images: Images work so well in breaking up copy and engaging site visitor. Has your developer the know-how on how to get you free (or royalty free) images or will they recommend 'better images' where you must pay a small once off charge (eg €25) that suits and brands your business better. Though free, some of the non-descript, forgettable photos you see on sites (and bank posters!) these days do little but turn people off your site. These images may have a small charge attached but can instantly say something about your

business. Will your developer give you feedback on images you have sourced, or go the extra to find a better one? Know limits of their spec upfront.

- Three to five websites with design ideas that you like (can be from your industry or another)
- Competitor's websites (three to five)

Practical Issues

- What's your budget? Is it realistic for the features and functions you want??
- In my experience you don't get much for €300-400 and what might seem like a bargain might be pain in the long run when you want after service or extra work. Budget at least €700-1200 for a simple starter site with ecommerce site being at least double depending on features required. They can be cheaper if you upload the products yourself. These are rough benchmark prices, you need to pay more for enhanced design and features.
- Is there priority issues highlighted by the developer once briefed, and can parts be staged if the budget doesn't cover the total wish-list?
- Timeline – how long and what's the deadline?
- How will the site be tested and who will do it? Does it need to be?
- Who will decide the site is ready to go before launch?

Technology issues

- Domain name account details, hosting, etc. Who does it, how much does it cost and when does it need to be done in order for your web developer to start work on the site.
- Who registers the domain name address? Who engages with Company's Registration Office and why would you need to? [Here's a useful link for start-ups.](#)
- Where will be the site be hosted? Who will host your website? Are you picking this service based purely on price or have you had a recommendation. I've seen many SMEs run into trouble having a poor hosting service provider.

Timings and Project Management

Get an idea of how long the process should take, along with key approval milestones so you can plan development amidst your busy day to day. A common issue I see it the business starting off with great energy, focus and through the process losing the will to finish it properly. Or the process drags on much longer than it should. Keeping this focus through the project where an independent mentor, confidante or third party business advisor can really add value to the process

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