

Updating Your Web Site As Your Business Grows

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Updating and upgrading a Web Site can take considerable time and resources. Your Web Site will have to grow organically as you introduce new products and services. You can also upgrade it to add new features that make it easier for your customers and visitors to use your site and do business online.

What You Need to Know

How important is it to use professional services to upgrade a Web Site?

If you are planning a large, complex site or want to add more content and functionality, working with an experienced designer and programmer from the outset will save you a lot of time later. He or she can also help you to incorporate features like Flash animation, forms, and search tools that may be difficult to manage if you are not experienced.

What to Do

Set Objectives

Before you plan the new content or features for your Web Site, you should set specific objectives. These could include:

- increase the level of business generated through the Web Site;
- increase the number of sales leads acquired via the Web Site;
- increase overall visitor numbers;
- increase percentage of returning visitors;
- offer customers better service;
- offer customers greater convenience;
- offer customers the ability to buy online.

Carry Out Regular Maintenance

If you plan to add new features and content to your Web Site, it is essential to maintain the existing content at the same time. One of the most important tasks is to ensure that all your links continue to work as they should. Adding new content, or changing pages and files can lead to broken links or images and pages that do not load properly. The more complex your site gets, the more difficult this problem can become. It is important to allocate time to maintain your site so that you do not suddenly get hit with time-consuming updates and large maintenance bills.

Keep Content Up to Date

As well as adding new content and features, make sure that existing content is up to date. Out-of-date press releases or product information benefits no one, so make sure that your site always contains the latest available information. However, there may be value in some of the information that has been updated—press releases, software updates, articles, or transcripts of speeches may be useful to some of your visitors. You can deal with this by creating an archive, with material organized by topic or in date order.

Set Updating Schedules

Updating is easier to manage if you set a schedule. This can be based on planned events like new product launches or other company announcements. You can also set targets like publishing a weekly or monthly newsletter or adding new articles once a month. Make visitors aware of the changes by announcing new content on your home page or sending e-mail alerts. Experience indicates that regularly refreshing content can keep visitors coming back. If the content of your Web Site remains static, users may not revisit it, and you may lose opportunities to promote new products or services.

Use Visitor Information to Plan Upgrades

When you are planning upgrades, use visitor information to find out which of your pages are most popular. This information is generally available from your Web hosting service provider or via software that you can install yourself. You can also use visitor feedback as a basis for planning. This information can prove invaluable in planning new pages or new content that visitors will find useful. You should also compare your site with competitors' sites to see whether any features might be appropriate for your own site

Evaluate Progress

As part of the evaluation process you should evaluate progress regularly, with major reviews at six months and a year:

- Monitor and review the impact of the changes against your objectives.
- Get feedback from staff, customers, and suppliers on the changes.

Offer Customers Self-Service

You can use your Web Site to offer customers self-service facilities. Self-service reduces support costs and improves convenience for customers. It means you can deliver service around the clock, without tying up key staff. It also enables you to reduce your telephone-based support facilities by transferring support resources to the Web Site. Self-service is important to a number of sales and customer service processes:

- delivery of information
- direct sales
- sales administration
- customer support
- technical support

With self-service, customers can obtain information on products, prices, features, and order status from a Web Site, then place orders directly. Customers also recognize the value of these services. Many have reported significant savings in productivity through improved support and better asset management. This strengthens customer relationships and makes self-service a powerful differentiator.

Introduce Online Ordering

Good sites reduce the selection and ordering process to a minimum:

- Product information and details of variations are included on a single page.
- The ordering and payment page includes all the details necessary to process the order.
- Regular customers can simply add new purchases to an ordering page that has all other contact and payment details in place.

A clear, easy-to-use order form allows customers to place their orders quickly. The form should include:

- customer details;
- product details;
- quantity;
- price;
- discount;
- total cost;
- payment options;
- mechanism to submit the order;
- order acknowledgment and payment approval.

Set Up Online Payment Facilities

If you plan to offer online ordering, you need a secure payment processing system. Payment processing services are available from banks and independent specialists. If you are dealing with an independent, you should ask for details of their security measures. Make sure they offer secure payment sites protected by industry-approved protocols. Check their policy on holding customer credit card details. Ask them about the security of their links to other organizations in the payment approval chain. They may have to transmit details to banks, credit reference agencies, or other parties, as well as communicating with your company. Each transmission represents a potential security risk.

Use Landing Pages to Improve Response Rates

A landing page is a special Web Site page that visitors are directed to when they click on a link, for example from an e-mail or an online advertisement. The page features information on a product or service promoted in the e-mail or advertisement and its objective is to encourage the visitor to buy online or take some other action that leads to a sale. A landing page gives you greater control over the way your visitors act when they are on your Web Site. You want them to take action quickly by making a purchase online or requesting information that you can follow up later. If you want to follow up later you could ask visitors to:

- register for an event;
- complete an information request form;
- download a whitepaper;
- subscribe to an online newsletter;
- request a sales call.

Create an Online Press Office

Putting press information online speeds up distribution of press material, reduces costs, and can improve relationships with journalists by making it easier for them to source information. You should place copies of the latest releases on your Web Site. If you issue new releases regularly, put a short summary of the story on the main press page with a hyperlink to the full story. Make sure that the selection of current press releases are updated regularly. Older versions or out of date stories should be archived. You can also set up a news alert facility that enables journalists to choose the updates and topics they need. The service, which could be called `mynews@abcxyz.com`, brings journalists the latest company news, features, and videos to their e-mail box. The material could include:

- press releases;
- feature articles;
- videos;
- executive briefings;
- Webcasts and online press kits.

Create an Online Publication Library

The Internet has become a key medium for product research, so you should make it easy for visitors to find product information on your Web Site:

- Convert your publications to PDFs so that visitors can download them.
- Create a library listing all the publications available with a brief description of each.
- Place links to publications on pages where you describe relevant products or industry solutions.
- Place a list of publications on your press information page.

Set Up an Online Community

You can encourage visitors to return more frequently by setting up a virtual community on your Web Site. Facilities to support the community could include, newsletters, discussion groups, and information. You can also use your online community facilities to allow members to join an online club and enjoy privileged services, using the membership database to offer personalized incentives and promotions.

An online discussion group gives users the facilities for posting messages on your site. The messages should represent helpful information and may include requests for help or further information. Some sites set up facilities for feedback or product review, introducing an opportunity

for objective, independent comment. The goal is to encourage other members of the community to suggest answers, provide help, or contribute to the discussion of a specific issue. Discussion groups help to build credibility for the site and strengthen customer relationships.

What to Avoid

You Make a Site Too Complex to Use

It can be tempting to add more and more sophisticated facilities to a site so that it has all the “bells and whistles.” However, this can make the site slow to access and difficult to use. Introducing fresh content and adding functionality that is useful to visitors is a more sensible approach.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Sterne, Jim, *Web Metrics: Proven Methods for Measuring Web Site Success* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2002.

Web Site:

Target Marketing of Santa Barbara: www.targeting.com