



Chapter 2

Web Design

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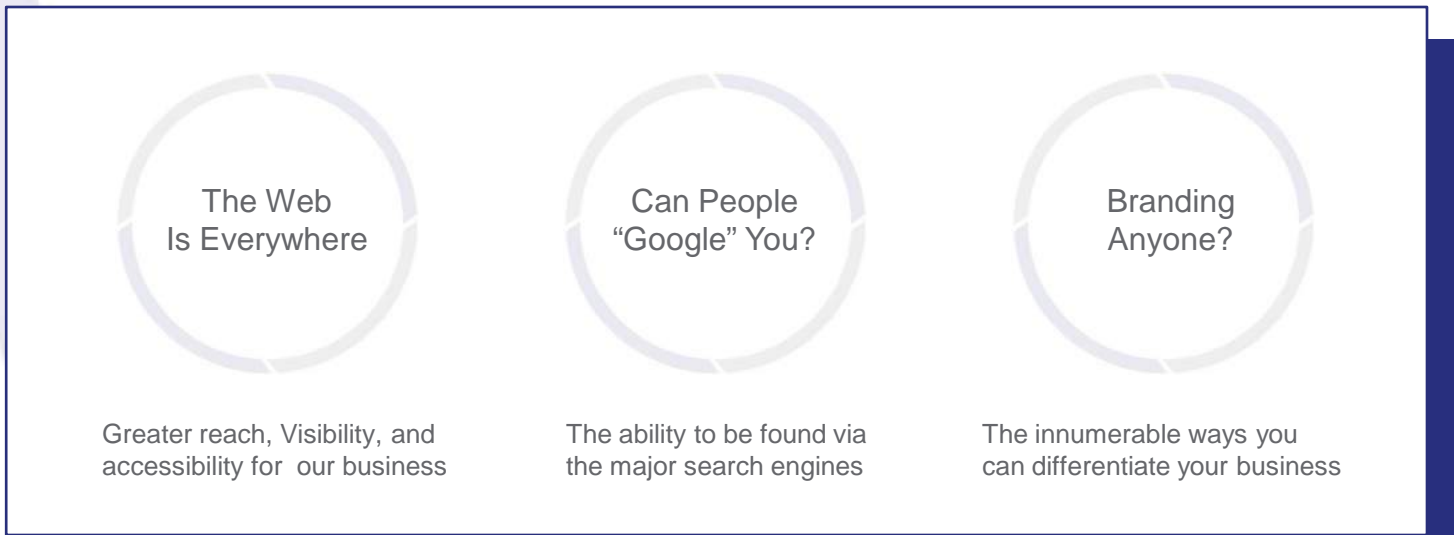
The stage is set, all the planning's in place, and your business is ready and raring to take its digital marketing to the next level. You've had the internal discussions, you've established your goals and objectives, you've got timelines, documentation, and all your other marketing ducks in a row. But what's going to be your first move?

Well, if you recall, the best parts about your shiny new digital marketing strategy are its comprehensiveness, its adaptability, and its direct connection to your unique business goals. Not only has your strategy evaluated where you currently stand, but it's also laid the foundation for where you will (and should) go next.

What's that? None of this sounds familiar? Oh boy, this is embarrassing. You better [head on over to our download page](#) and pick up the first chapter before continuing. Don't worry, we'll wait right here for you. Now, where were we?

So, Why Begin with your Website?

When it comes to marketing, your website acts as a central hub where the essence of your brand lives and interacts with your audience. A website is also the first step toward establishing a presence in the huge community that makes up the digital frontier. For the most part, a website's higher-level benefits are pretty obvious:





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We all know the value of making a good first impression. We compose ourselves, remember to smile, engage in conversation, and let our best attributes shine through. For your business, your website is that first handshake with your potential customers. In this chapter, we'll make sure that handshake is firm and inviting, not awkward and clammy.

Before your web design process begins, though, there are a few things we should probably clear up—

Your Business's Website is an Investment

Yes, it's true. If you take the time and allocate the resources for proper planning, strategy, execution, measurement, and maintenance, your website will last for years to come. Design trends may come and go, but a website that's clean, well-organized, and customizable trumps those aesthetic bells and whistles every time.

As Technology Changes, so should your Website

Websites' capabilities and back-end technologies seem to change about as often as the weather. While that may be a hard fact to swallow, it shouldn't convince you that your website will be reduced to old news as soon as it's up and running. There are ways to account for additional functionalities and upcoming technological standards, and we'll show you how.

Upkeep & Maintenance are Required

Your business may only be open from 9 to 5, but your website is open 24/7/365. Just like your treasured digital marketing strategy, your website is going to need some TLC on a regular basis to ensure it's up-to-date and in proper working order. Security updates, software patches, and QA testing are just some of the practices you'll need to become familiar with.



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A Strategic Approach is Vital to Success

Are you sensing a theme here? In order to maximize this digital asset's potential, every aspect has to be viewed through a strategic lens. Whether it's functionality, design, programming, content, or optimization, the only way to create the most effective final product is to strategize every step of the way and always remember to keep your eyes on the prize (in this case, an all-expense-paid trip to achieving your marketing goals and objectives).

Now that we understand why your business needs a website, let's start with how to get the whole web design process started.

Strategy



If you think of your new website like a building (or, if you skipped breakfast this morning, a freshly-baked cinnamon roll), your strategy would serve as the foundation on which the building is built (or the gluten that holds your cinnamon roll dough together). During your web design project, a strong strategy must be formulated in order to keep the process focused and to prevent it from crumbling once you start adding walls, floors, and windows (or once your dough is rolled up, hits the oven, and gets that satisfying application of frosting).

Just in case these crafty metaphors don't make the point clear enough, we'll break it down a little more deeply. A strategic approach to the web design process ensures the project's success because strategy...



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Promotes Efficiency & Organization

Why spend more time and money if you don't have to? Since a strategy will be at the heart of your web design process, you won't have to worry about misplaced tasks, wayward staff members, or huge holes appearing in your budget. Your approach will ensure that you account for all of these components *before* you get the ball rolling, so you'll be able to steer clear of future headaches (and those pesky unforeseen expenses).

Keeps Everything Goal-Oriented & Comprehensive

While we're on the subject of planning, we can't forget that having a strategy in play means that the final product will be something specifically catered to your business's marketing goals. Your website will be built with these in mind from the outset, meaning there's less likelihood that something will slip through the cracks or get left out. Your goals will inform everything, providing direction for the design, functionality, and more.

Accounts for Measurement & the Ability to Assess Effectiveness

When this baby hits the web, how will you determine whether you've actually hit your mark? This is where measurement makes its entrance. Let's face it; nothing's worth doing (or spending your marketing dollars on) unless it's got some juicy data chunks to prove its value. And continuing on with our theme of "eliminating the need to play catch-up after it's too late," outlining which user actions will constitute your onsite conversions now will lay the groundwork to make sure the rest of your analytics components go smoothly (Did all of that sound like esoteric, techno-babble, mumbo jumbo? Stay tuned for chapter # where we'll dive into analytics).

Allocates Necessary Resources & Budgets

Remember that talk of this website being an investment? Well, a strategic process is the best way to guarantee that your investment remains a wise one. How? By determining which resources are truly necessary for your project, you'll be able to devise the most accurate budget. A budget that's specific and, at the same time, covers items you may need down the line achieves this balance.



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Basically, with your strategic process, you'll be bringing together the best of both worlds.

Some of these benefits to strategy probably sounded familiar (especially if you've done your homework and read [our first chapter](#)). While it's clear how a strategy can make a leaner, meaner, and more cost-effective website, that's only half the story. Just as important as internal processes, budgetary guidelines, and killer planning are the people who'll find themselves at the receiving end of your site.

Your Audience

Just because you know the ins and outs of your company's website like some kind of cunning, meticulous digital dungeon master, this could present a problem. We know, we know. Your website has myriad uses and applications to your marketing as a whole, but on another level, the site really isn't for you. It belongs to the people. The experiences your past, present, and future customers have on your site will be the true measure of its effectiveness, not to mention, a real-world litmus test of how close you are to achieving those marketing goals you set.

Because your business's website carries some serious marketing weight, it follows that your audience should be top of mind during these initial planning stages. Need a few more reasons why? Well lucky for you, we've laid out a few right here. Audience is a crucial factor to the website design process because...

They'll inform the Site's Content

Think about some websites you frequent. What is it about that site that compels you to return time after time? Is it the alluring and compelling visuals? The informative, yet approachable page text? A hilarious intro video with the theme song from Knight Rider playing in the background? No matter what it is, there's no arguing that a website's content is the most valuable resource to creating the ideal user experience. Everything must work together, and it must resonate with your audience; no but's about it.



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They'll inform the Visual Design

For some people, the content may not be the singular factor that gives a site that “Wow, this is for me” element. If content is king, then the design is the jeweled crown upon his head and the gilded throne upon which he sits. The former isn't left powerless without these adornments, but they do allow him to define his position and project his unique style unto his people. For your website, your visuals will likely play the crucial role of attracting people, and the content will encourage them to explore and convert. Unfortunately, one cannot properly do its job without the other.

They'll inform Functionality

Picture this—you perform a Google search for “decorative embroidered throw pillows” with the intention of providing a much-needed accent to your newly-painted living room. You're met with a website that has tons of information about throw pillows, countless images, design descriptions, and manufacturer information, but no way to purchase any of them. How long would it take before you decided to take your business elsewhere? Knowing your audience and their expectations upon visiting your website will ensure you cover all of your bases when it comes to functionality. How will visitors get in touch with you? Will they be downloading documents, purchasing products, or playing a game? In other words, what do you need to prepare in order to meet these expectations?

Now, some of what you've just read probably warrants a second look. Yes, really.

In other words, gain a thorough understanding of your audience before you dive head first into a new website (or any other marketing campaign you can think of, really). Not only will you be in a better position to make a more effective site, but you'll also know exactly how to chalk up your success when the time comes to slap some data on everything you've planned and strategized. As the old saying goes, “Nothing is worth doing unless you've got actionable data and KPI's to back it up.” Okay, we may have slightly altered the phrasing there, but you get the idea.



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Your Brand

At this point, things should be coming together. You know why your website is a wise direction to take your business's marketing makeover, and you know the huge role your audience will play in this strategic marketing extravaganza. All that's left is one final piece of the puzzle, and that's your brand.

Whether you're "Stu's Discount Auto Parts" or Kellogg, an established brand is the purest representation of your entire company. Whether people pass a billboard at 65mph, thumb through one of your brochures, or peruse your website for 5 minutes, a strong brand will make a lasting impression. What does that mean for your new website? We're glad you asked! An established brand means that your website will...

Add Consistency and Pizzazz to the Design

In very simple terms, your brand will help you answer all of the unforeseen questions around your website's design. Should "submit" buttons be blue or green? Should the language in calls-to-action be exciting and fun or formal and straightforward? Should the site have rounded corners or sharp edges? Should visuals dominate the content areas? What color schemes should be used? As things come together throughout the process and design choices must be made, you should fall back on your business's brand to guide your decisions. On that note, documenting these provisions in the form of brand guidelines is a great place to start.

Constitute your True Differentiation in the Digital World

It's one of the hardest things to do nowadays. The web is growing at a mind-boggling rate, and it's becoming harder and harder for businesses to break the mold online and be different than their competitors. Thankfully for you, differentiation and unique aspects are the keys to flushing out the core components of your brand. If you haven't thought much about your brand, please do so before continuing on in this chapter! Have a brainstorming session with your team and hammer out the factors that make your company one of a kind.



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What internal strengths give you an advantage over the next guy? Do your products or services offer a different take on something otherwise considered ordinary? These will be the keys to achieving the greatest combination between flair and function. What internal strengths give you an advantage over the next guy? Do your products or services offer a different take on something otherwise considered ordinary? These will be the keys to achieving the greatest combination between flair and function.

Tie Everything (and We Mean Everything) Together

If there's one thing that'll act as the glue that holds your entire web design project together, it's your brand. Fundamentally, an established brand pervades every aspect of your company's marketing, whether online or off. It'll also serve as the backbone that promotes consistency across all your digital assets. From your ad designs, to the copy, to the landing page they link to, all the way to your conversion funnel and eventual follow-up, a single inconsistency can send a prospective customer packing. It will take time to craft your brand position, and it will take effort to ensure that everything is working in harmony. That may sound hard to swallow, but the long-term benefits are worth it.

What kind of benefits? How do easier decision-making, faster turnaround times, lower costs, and greater leads and sales sound? We thought so.

The Process

The time is finally here! We've pondered, positioned, and prepared, and only now can we set this project into motion. As you read the following sections, keep in mind that the process is not exhaustive; what follows are bare bones descriptions of the steps necessary to create the most effective website possible. Because your goals, industry, and brand will have such a critical role in these steps, we're only covering them at the highest of levels.



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In other words, your mileage may vary.

These steps are also contingent upon the extent to which you've done your homework and prepared. Cutting corners on any of the factors mentioned above can slow this process down and make more work for yourself at the most inopportune times (like after your site is already up and running).

If you haven't been taking notes, now's the time. Let's get started!

1. Define the Project

It may seem like a no-brainer, but a documented plan is essential to this project going off without a hitch (we've mentioned the benefits to writing things down before). With all your reference materials in hand (your marketing strategy, branding guidelines, interviews, meeting notes, audience data, and the like), you can begin formulating the Project Brief. This document will contain information pertaining to your future website's goals, your target audience, the primary message, and how the site will differentiate you from a competitive standpoint. This may be hard to visualize, so we've included a sample project brief below.

Project Brief – Stu's Discount Auto Parts

Summary: This web design project is being conducted to redesign the current, outdated website and introduce new and advanced functionality for customers. It will also serve as an avenue for additional advertising and branding opportunities. This project is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2013.

Audience:

Age: 28-50+



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Continued...

Occupation / Interests: Automotive enthusiasts, mechanically-inclined males, repair shops, automotive dealerships, auto auctions, etc.

Education: Technical Degree / Bachelor's Degree and above

Internet Experience: Minimal to Advanced

Needs / Expectations: Fast shipping, US-based distribution, buy/sell online, contact salesperson via chat

Primary Message:

The largest selection of new and used automotive parts from Bangor to Tallahassee. Easy service, low prices, quality products, and fast & friendly customer service.

Competitive Differentiation:

International shipping options, opportunity for customers to sell their automotive parts via the website

2. Develop the Site's Structure

After hammering out a project brief and definition, the next stage is to develop the site's overall structure. For this important phase, think of your website design project in terms of building an addition onto your house. Unless you know what features you want in the new rooms, you'll have no idea where to place electrical outlets, furniture, or light fixtures. Similarly, without an idea of how your site will operate and the features it requires, you'll have no way to craft an effective visual design. With that being said, the most important parts of your new website's structure are a content outline, a site diagram, and wireframes.



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3. Content Outline, Site Diagram, and Wireframes

The process of creating a content outline is fairly straightforward, especially if your project falls into a “redesign” rather than a total overhaul. Either way, the important thing to keep in mind is to categorize your content, group it together, and organize it in a logical way. With Stu’s Discount Auto Parts, for example, it wouldn’t make sense to group the pages pertaining to new products with the pages describing each of Stu’s many locations. If the page categories make sense to you, then they’ll make sense to your site visitors; it’s this fulfillment of user expectation that often spells the difference between a sale and a lost opportunity.

A site diagram is simply a visual replica of the content outline. It may seem simple, but its benefits are actually two-fold. For one, a visual diagram of the entire website will allow you to (you guessed it) visualize the site’s layout. This will make it easy to determine whether your page hierarchy makes sense and if this hierarchy will aid in a user’s journey toward the information they’re seeking. This diagram will also get you thinking about link structure, a very important factor when it comes to both user experience and search engine rankings (you’ll learn why in chapter # when we cover SEO).

With these documents in hand, it’s time to view this website at its most granular level. Wireframes are essentially skeletal (non-graphical) layouts for each unique web page. Using your goals (found on your handy dandy project brief) and the way you’ve organized and prioritized your content (with the content outline), you’ll be able to determine how and where each page’s content will appear. Are there 3rd level pages to contend with? Where should product images appear to have the most impact? Is internal site search more important than your Twitter feed? All of these questions will be answered with wireframes, as they contain all major elements as they will appear in the final designs.



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4. Design This Bad Boy

Once you've gone through the process and have some killer site framework, now's the time for your brand and creativity to shine through. There are many avenues through which a website can be designed, but regardless of which option you choose, a great tip is to bring your ideas to the table. Whether that's via post-it notes on the wireframes or a stream of consciousness on a sheet of paper, anything to bring your vision to life is beneficial for designers (because let's face it, they're not mind readers). And if there's something you aren't sure about, that's the time to let the designer have free reign, brainstorm some concepts, and offer up several solutions. At that point, it's all about what you like, what aligns with your brand, and what will facilitate meeting the project's goals.

5. Create and Prioritize Content

While the designs are being whipped up, it's time to focus on content. Looking back at all the documentation you've accrued so far, you'll need to identify areas to focus on from a content standpoint. Is there a portfolio section that showcases your work? What about a client testimonial page? If there are areas where content is missing, then that's where you should start. Send emails, gather documents, purchase stock images, and create a content cache that is organized according to your outlines. Make sure images are labeled appropriately, headers are clearly identified, and any necessary linking is incorporated. The more you can stuff into these documents, the smoother implementation will go. They don't call it a "master document" for nothing.

6. Build the Site

Whether an outside vendor or your in-house IT team is building your website, there are two necessary pieces before the code-fest gets underway. Clearly documented requirements in terms of functionality and technology will ensure that nothing critical to the site is left out and nothing unnecessary is added. They're the ultimate insurance policy for streamlining this process and saving additional time and aggravation. Some information you should include on your technical requirements



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7. Test, Test, Test

When the time finally comes and your site is in a live environment, it's crucial that you and your team take it for a test drive. Does all the functionality work correctly? Is it compatible in all major browsers? Does it account for mobile (if required)? How is the page load time? Normally, there's only a short window set aside for QA testing, so you should make the most of it. Using your technical and functional specs, test each component and give the site a thorough run-through. If it's functionally sound, technically flawless, visually stunning, and effortless to navigate, then you're ready to go live.



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What Happens Now?

With your new website comes new responsibilities, and there are a few things you can do to make sure your site is always functioning and performing at full steam, including:

- Regular security patches and software updates
- Ongoing content optimization
- Continuous analysis and measurement via analytics
- Retaining consistency when branding elements change
- Spot checking for technical bugs or compatibility issues

Many of these processes will be explored in much greater detail through subsequent chapters, so stay tuned!

Some Takeaways

Whether you're designing your website or refreshing your existing setup, keep in mind that having a plan is key. Above all, take the time to prepare your documentation, scramble the troops, and execute via a process. If the ins and outs of those preparatory stages are eluding you, we highly recommend taking a look at our [first chapter](#) to help you get into the right strategic mindset.



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From there, follow the web design process using these action items :

- Brainstorm and strategize to gather ideas for design, functionality, and opportunities for measurement
- Clearly define the project with your goals, target audience, and brand differentiation in mind
- Develop the structural layout of the site with a clear and sensible page hierarchy
- Conceptualize and generate design-based ideas (especially if you're utilizing external creative resources), making sure to include variations to choose from
- Create and gather your content and incorporate as much as possible into a single "master" document
- Build the site based upon documented technical and functional requirements
- Perform usability testing to identify any problem areas or outstanding compatibility issues



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There you have it. One day your business was on the brink of digital obscurity, and now it can establish itself on the cutting edge where function, style, and security all meet to mine marketing gold.

Effective digital marketing tactics, no matter the channel, are predicated on a website that simultaneously wow's visitors and provides all the information they need. And now you've got the tools and the know-how to make it happen.

Have questions, concerns, or just want to share how you've recommended this eBook to all your friends and family? [Drop us a line](#) or connect with us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), or [Google+](#)!