



AMAZING INTERNET TECHNICAL BULLETIN

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22 May, 2002

WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE? (REV.1)

There are basically two types of visitor that will visit your website:

1. The first time visitor
2. The return visitor

Getting the first type to arrive at your website is covered somewhat in my earlier paper on search engines – you get people to arrive at your website by making it known, promoting it to the sector of the general public that is likely to have an interest in the content of your site.

Getting the second type of visitor to arrive at your website is the subject of this paper.

The primary datum for creating a successful website is 'Content is King!' – without adequate content, people will not stay long on your site and they are unlikely to return. It can have all the bells and whistles in the world, be the most attractive design known to man, but without content it is nothing – an empty shell.

Of course, supporting the content there are other items of importance:

- **Aesthetics:** the site should have an attractive design, but the design should not be distracting after all the purpose of the site is to present information and not just look pretty. The design should also be consistent across the site – create a stable environment to present the content of the site.
- **Organisation:** the site should be organised in a logical manner. You should be able to see at a glance from the site menus where the content you are looking for will be found. Menu items should have concise but meaningful names. Use site sections and subsections to break your site in to logical chunks.
- **Orientation:** the site should indicate in some way where you currently are on the site – a bit like the 'You are here' on street maps! You can do this by keeping page titles the same as menu item names.
- **Intuitive:** the site should do what is expected when you click on something. Doing unexpected things leads to confusion and frustration.

Creating Good Content

There are several things you should bear in mind when preparing content. This applies to all content, not just for websites:

- **Visibility:** Use a readable font at a sensible size. The colour of the text should be high contrast relative to the background. Don't use a fancy font just because you think it looks nice!

- **Style:** Use a site-wide publishing style – if you use orange text for links then all links on your site should be orange. Similarly if the main text size is 14 pixels, then all of the main text should be this size. The thing we are trying to achieve here is consistency. Additionally, one of the most common faults of websites is to make all the text bold, or to use lots of bold text; the use of bold text is to highlight a word or point. If you overuse it then it loses its effectiveness.
- **Punctuation, grammar and spelling:** Make sure you express yourself clearly. Also get someone else to proof-read the content as they will pick up on errors that you may have missed.
- **Informative:** The content should be useful and informative. Don't spend time padding out your content just to make it seem more *unless* doing so adds additional value. Many commercial websites fall foul of this especially technical company websites – they dumb-down the content which means it loses its value! Rather than dumb-down, the correct solution is to educate. This is covered in the next three points.
- **Nomenclature:** When using words, acronyms and abbreviations that are specific to your subject matter, define them the first time you use them. If your content is not understood, it is unlikely to be read to conclusion and the information will not be retained – remember that not all readers of your content will be experts in or even familiar with your subject matter.
- **Illustrations:** If you are explaining something complex in your content, use illustrations to help convey your point. Give examples of the point in real use. Make sure that the readers understand what you are trying to get across.
- **Referencing:** If your content is aimed at 'experts' in your field, reference other works that give the basics of the subject so that a non-expert, should they wish to exert the effort, can read and understand your content.
- **Summarise:** If you have a lengthy piece of content to publish, then summarise the content at the top of the page. You can also split the content into multiple pages of a reasonable size.

Obviously the above guidelines should be used within the context of your content and site. The great thing about content published on the Internet is linking – you can take a phrase in your content and link it to a document that explains that phrase fully. Don't be afraid to use links!

Keep the Content Fresh

Having good content means that more people will actually read it. But once they've read all the content on your site, what then? You need to add new content regularly! And you need to let your public know that there is new content.

One of the easiest ways to achieve the latter point is to have a 'What's New' section to your website. You can have the new items displayed on the default starting page of your website.

Another, possibly more effective way, to achieve the way is to communicate directly with your public. Create a mailing list and ask visitors to your site to 'subscribe' to the mailing list in order to receive email when there is new material on the website. A word of warning here: be prepared to remove people from your mailing list if they request it – many people get lots of SPAM email and some of them get irate when they receive email they perceive to be unsolicited!

There is another way to keep the content on your site fresh – get the users themselves to create the content! You can do this in many ways. One of the most widely used is the message board. People can use the message board part of your site to discuss things related to the nature of your site. Be prepared to spend time developing and maintaining it though – like many things, a message board will only flourish if nurtured if cared for.

Once you have your site content in shape and ideas for developing it into the future, you will find that the number of visitors and page views on your site will continue to increase. Publishing a website is not the same as publishing a print document – it is an ongoing development effort that requires planning.

Moving your Content Forward

When developing and adding new content to your site, one thing to bear in mind is ‘Is this what my viewing public wants to see?’. Without asking your public, you cannot know the answer to this question. So use surveys to see what is wanted. Examine your website statistics to see what parts of your site are being read the most. By developing content that is wanted by your public, you are assured that they will read it provided that it delivers!

Content Myths

As a final section to this paper, I want to mention a couple of points that are sometimes made with respect to content and explain them.

Some people have the idea that pages on a website should be very short, that the content should not scroll on the page since users of websites do not use scroll down. I say in reply to this that people do not scroll down because the content is not interesting or is badly written! The idea that pages should not scroll is not unfounded but it is a wrong target. The target should be the quality of the content itself.

A similar point is that people can better understand content if the line length is less than say 10-15 words. I say that people can better understand content if it is well written and that concepts and words used within the content are defined properly as outlined above. In addition, use sensible white-spacing in your publishing style – this means content margins, paragraph separation, distance of titles from paragraphs, etc – and a clear, legible, font. These things make content easy to read, not the number of words in a line.

To summarise the initial question of ‘What makes a successful website?’ the answer is content, content, content!

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