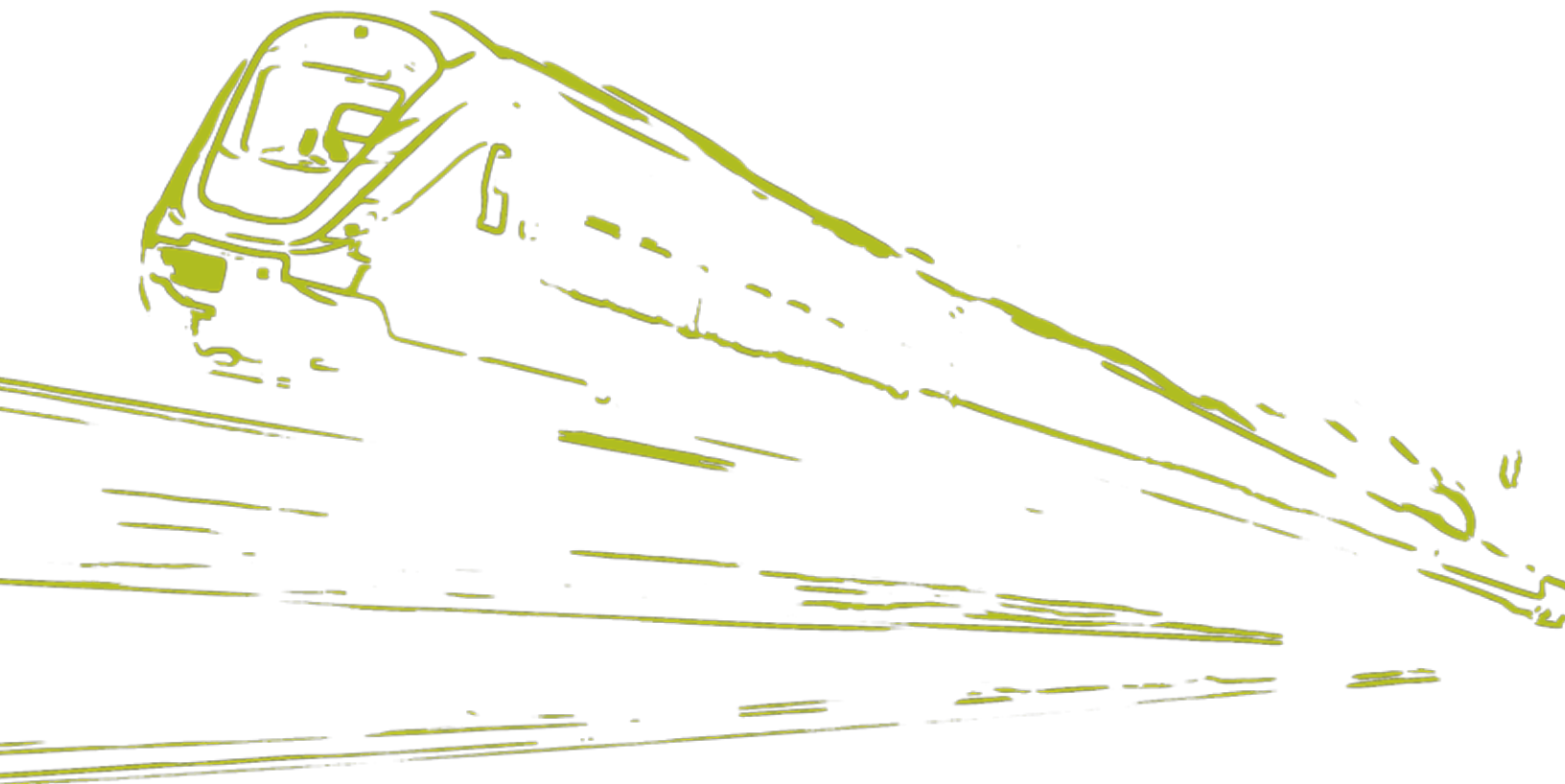




FROM GOOD IDEA TO GOING LIVE: CREATING A WEBSITE THAT WORKS

406.534.2140 • www.kineticmg.com • 2507 Montana Avenue Suite B • Billings, MT 59101



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There are few businesses or organizations today for whom a website is not a good idea. A good idea, that is, if the website is planned and executed well. This whitepaper has been created to give you an overview of the process of successful website development, from the beginning idea stages through technical execution.

WHERE IT ALL BEGINS: THE PLANNING PROCESS

You've heard the saying "there's only one chance to make a first impression"? Well, in marketing—including websites—this is absolutely true. That first impression is key to attracting your target audience and, eventually, converting that audience into satisfied customers.

For many businesses, the desire to get a website live can oftentimes overshadow the need to thoughtfully develop that site. This is, in almost every instance, a mistake. You see, while a website is a necessary component in most marketing plans, if it is done in haste, you are actually eliminating potential marketing opportunities—not to mention the risk of damage to your company's image. And while there are those who toss up a site with every intention of "completing it soon", it is more than likely that "soon" will become "eventually" and, potentially, "never". Thus, take the time now to plan out your website for success not only today, but in the long-term as well.

1. Why do you need a website?

The first step in planning your website begins not with what bells and whistles you'd like to see incorporated into it, but with one question: What is its purpose? Is it to be primarily an information source about your company, a storefront to sell your products or services, a resource about your industry for use by other consumers or businesses, or something else? Decide now what your goals are for your website, and design it around those goals and the content/features you need to accomplish them.

2. Who are you and what are you trying to say?

Hopefully, before you are thinking about putting together a website, you have undergone a branding—or re-branding—process. A successful branding process will have helped you discover your organization's authentic "self", highlighted your differentiators and clearly defined the content and tone of your message. Oftentimes, that process also introduces graphic components, such as a color palette, logo and design elements, all of which serve to emphasize your brand.

Your website should fully incorporate and serve to strengthen your brand. Thus, as you begin to plan your site, make sure that every component is consistent with who your company is, that it highlights what you do and that it delivers your message rather than detracts from it.

3. Who are you talking to, and who else is talking to them?

It may sound elementary—and it is—but you need to know the audience that you are trying to attract to your site. What do they want, what do they need and what do they expect? The functionality and content of your site should be geared to the people or organizations that you want to speak to. If your target audience is economists, it may not be wise to build your site with content or design that better

speaks to tattoo artists. Likewise, give tattoo artists the look, feel and information that they want and need to see.

Second, just as you know your audience, know your competition. Visit competitor sites to see what they're doing. It's not about copying—it's about analyzing what they're doing wrong, what they're doing right, and where you can be both different and better. Knowledge is never a bad thing—especially when it comes to marketing your company and its brand.

MAP IT OUT

Now that you know who you are, what your goals are, and who you're talking to, it's time to determine how they'll move through the site by creating a sitemap. This is an area where you are going to want to work with a web professional who can assist you in ensuring that your site will be functional, easily navigated and that is consistent with the best practices.

1. Let your imagination run wild.

Before you meet with that web professional, however, it's a good idea to brainstorm, either by yourself or with a group, about all the things you'd like to have the site contain. Let yourself go crazy at first—you never know where a good idea might come from—and write everything down. This is one area that you can go crazy, including things that you may not even know are possible.

2. Sharpen the pencil.

Once you've got all the wants and wishes written down, it's time to start focusing on the realities. Start by putting them into categories; for instance, one category could be about your company. Another could focus exclusively on your product catalog or portfolio. Another could include the tools you'd like to see on the site; for instance, a calendar, a blog, social media tools, a shopping cart, etc. You might have five categories, or you might have ten.

Once everything is in a category, start looking at the realities. What are the needs, and what are the wants? What do you have to have, and what can you live without?

Remember, a lot is possible on a website. But there are multiple considerations—not the least of which is cost. Especially if you're on a tight budget, feel free to keep a few of those wants on there, but understand that you'll get more return on your investment if you focus on the important things—and present them well—than trying to incorporate everything and doing a poor job of it.

3. Call in the pros.

Once you've created categories and narrowed down the information or tools you'd like to see incorporated into your site, it's time to have another set of eyes take a look at it. A professional web developer, as mentioned above, can assist you with taking that information and placing it in a sitemap or wireframe which includes a vision representation of how a visitor might navigate through your site. He or she will also be able to give you information about the realities about specific site features, including the time needed to program them, whether or not they will help you meet your goals and objectives and, oftentimes, the cost both in terms of the amount you'll have to invest as well as any cost to site speed or function if they are

added. This developer may or may not be your site's designer; at this point, you are looking at function and flow—the design comes later.

Keep in mind that for some people may wish to bring in a developer at the beginning of this process, as he or she will be aware of the latest technologies and could provide great insight into possibilities you might not have even considered.

CONTENT, CONTENT, CONTENT

In real estate, the main consideration is location. In the world of websites, it's content. What you include on your website, whether text, graphics, photographs or video, will ultimately determine how quickly someone will find how your site, how fast they will engage with it and more importantly, how long he or she will remain there.

1. Copy

Quality web copy isn't easy to produce. It must be short and to the point, carry a tone that is authentic to your organization and be constructed in such a way that it will assist in boost your site's organic SEO. It must engage and excite the reader, and yet ensure that it clearly informs them, in a positive manner, who you are and what you do. And a word to the wise, if you have not written web content before, it is a good investment to work with someone who has. The home page of your website is not the best place for you to experiment.

Web copy should go through reviews and edits as part of the process. It is improbable—if not impossible—that it will be done perfectly right the first time. You will know far more about your company than the writer and your input will be invaluable in creating a copy that will accurately represent you.

At the same time, however, keep in mind that if you are working with a professional writer, he or she will be able to provide valuable guidance as to why specific items should or should not be included, whether copy is too long or heavy or if one word will suffice instead of three. Some will balk at having "an outsider" tell them what does and doesn't work, but this is one place where it's important to stop and realize that just as you know your business, so do they. You're paying for their expertise—you would do well to listen to what they have to say.

2. Make it Plentiful

A lack of content makes your site shallow—and destines it for failure. You can have a great concept, a terrific layout and phenomenal design, but if you lack quality content, your site will never have the success you're hoping for.

3. Keep it Current

If you think that you can put up some information on your website and have it stay, exactly the same, for months—or years—think again. You need to have a plan to add to your content frequently through page updates, links, blogs, etc.

4. Pictures ≠ 1000 Words

Keep in mind that although major search engines have improved their ability to read flash-based and image files, they still are focused on keywords on a page. Thus, if your home page is entirely or largely flash-driven, it cannot be optimized effectively. As such, balance your graphic (video/flash) content with text that can be easily searched and found both by people and by search engines.

DESIGN

Like website content preparation, website design is a science all its own. How your website looks will either draw people in or cause them to immediately reach for their mouse to click right back out of it. Using templates or so-called “dorm room” designers may save you money in the short-term, but can be costly in terms of the website success.

Keep in mind that a website does not necessarily need to be a masterful work of art. Is Microsoft’s site the most beautiful thing around? Not really. Ebay? It’s actually pretty hideous. Google? Their name on a white background. But that’s actually the point. The design of these sites actually emphasizes who these companies are and what they do.

A good, experienced designer will help you establish the right look and feel for your website.

1. Color Use

Colors have different meanings and impacts on different people. Using the demographics of your audience, the product or service that you are promoting and the response that you’re hoping to elicit, the designer will choose an appropriate color palette.

Studies have shown, for instance, that red and yellow are preferred by women, who also are able to differentiate subtle differences in shades, while men are drawn to blue and orange. Perhaps unsurprisingly, teens and 20-somethings like bright colors and high contrast, while more mature adults are drawn to more muted and conservative tones.

If you work with people in different countries, or those in a specific cultural group, it is important to know how those cultures relate to colors. A color that represents purity in one country, for instance, might have a far different meaning in another.

2. Photo Use

Photos and other graphics can add interest to your website and emphasize its message. If possible, use custom photography so that your site is truly unique, and to give visitors an authentic glimpse into who you are and what you do. If you do use stock photography, choose quality photos—and make sure that they aren’t similar to (or exactly) those found on your competition’s site.

3. Mock Up

Using software such as Photoshop or Illustrator, the web designer will begin by creating “mocks”, essentially graphics that show how your site might look. This is the time for you to make changes to the site’s look—when changes only affect the electronic “drawing”. Changing the site once programming has begun will be both time consuming and expensive. And remember, you may go through several mocks before the final one has been selected.

PROGRAMMING

Here’s where it’s time for the rubber to meet the road: programming your website. This is where the programmer will “cut up” the graphic design and make it viewable online. He or she will also add text, videos and other features that will serve to enhance your site and your online profile.

Again, this is an area where working with an experienced and knowledgeable web professional is crucial to overall site success. Although there are packaged site-building programs on the market, few are likely to meet your needs, most lack the ability to allow a programmer to access the code, and many have code which is outdated, sloppy and lacks functionality. As such, your site may lack the SEO you want, and future expansion of your site will be difficult at best.

1. Language

An experienced web programmer will be able to utilize different programming languages in order to ensure that your site will contain the components you need the most, such as an e-commerce shopping cart, blog or other interactive features. HTML is the most common language, as it is both powerful and easy to use for SEO. Other languages, such as CSS, Javascript, PHP, ASP, SQL, XML are just a few that may be utilized to create your site and its features.

2. Standards and Practices

When you work with an experienced programmer, he or she will make sure that your site is constructed using web industry best practices. That means that your site will function as you expect it to, be adaptable/expandable and appropriately found by major search engines such as Google, BING or Yahoo!. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) has created guidelines and standards for design to encourage ease of searchability and analysis, and Goggle has also published webmaster guidelines based on its own search criteria. Your programmer should be award of these standards and properly incorporate them into your site for long-term functionality and better user experience. These include ensuring appropriate page names, titles and/or meta tags to boost searchability.

3. Testing and Security

Once the programmer has completed your site, it is important that he or she conduct rigorous testing of it. First, it is important that the site can be seen and searched by all of the major search engines, and that the site functions work on both PC's and Macs. Considerations regarding user access, such as whether the site will be accessible/usable by those who still use slower connections (including dial-up) must also be a part of that testing process. Finally, the programmer will also conduct extensive testing to ensure that all of the security features are working so that your data is protected, as well as any information/data to be provided by visitors, such as credit card information, personal identification data, etc.

3. Going Live

At long last it's the day you've been waiting for: the day your website enters the fast-flowing internet. At this point, all pages accessible by the public should be completely populated and ready for use. This is far from the last step, however. Once the site is live, you should continue to work with the web programmer to track use and make other improvements based on that use. For instance, if visitors to your site are not readily using the links provided, consider their design and/or functionality; if they never seek (or find) a specific page, consider removing it or changing it to boost the number of views; or if you see that clients are leaving the site after visiting one or more specific pages, consider a content review to ensure readability.