

The 10 dos and don'ts of website development every CEO should know

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With the current economic downturn and significant layoffs among sales staff, the web has become more important than ever as a means of communicating with customers/clients/membership. But I have yet to meet a CEO who likes website development. It makes business leaders uncomfortable. The web experts speak in a cryptic language – CMS, KM, XML, CSS. The site seems to take forever to build, costs more than expected, and invariably provides less value than the organization had hoped.

No one likes signing a big check without some idea as to what they're getting. So if you're a business leader, here are a few basic, non-technical tips that will significantly increase your chances for online success. And they let you do what you do best – lead.

1. Don't confuse marketing with communication.

Most marketing efforts are concerned with gaining the attention and interest of a particular target audience – often quite aggressively. But on the web, your audience has come to you voluntarily. So, lighten up on the promotional hype. Yes, your site can become an important sales tool, but it should do so in straightforward, conversational language. Don't let an eager salesrep talk you into blinking banners on every page. Instead, regard your website as part of your service mix first and your marketing mix second. It's about creating a valuable experience for your site's visitors, about starting a dialog with your customers (and potential customers). Therefore, make sure your web team represents a good cross section of disciplines in your organization.

Do: View your website as part of your customer-service package.

2. Don't view your website as a software development project

Creating and maintaining most informational websites is no more a "software project" than publishing your annual report. You write reports using a standard word processing program; you publish to the web using a standard content-management system. There are dozens of superb systems available, and hundreds of excellent add-ons (survey systems, social networks, video channels, wikis, etc.) so don't let anyone talk you into building one from scratch. That's also why this activity shouldn't be handed over to your IT department. Granted, a site with very sophisticated functionality will probably require special programming, but don't count on your in-house skills as being enough.

Do: Whenever possible, purchase professional web-publishing software from a single-focus vendor (Important note: Microsoft, IBM, and SAP probably shouldn't be on your shortlist, despite anything your IT department tells you).

3. Don't couple unrelated initiatives

Just because one project concerning computers and customers is in the works, you won't necessarily create synergy by tacking on other initiatives that also involve computers and customers. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) is a frequent sinner. But unless you have a huge budget and sophisticated needs, both your website and your CRM activities will be far more successful (and much cheaper) if you tackle them one at a time. Keep your intranet development out of this, too (although you can probably use the same publishing software used for your website). In other words, don't let HR take over the project either. And don't *turn* your website into a software development project.

Do: Deal with your website – and just your website. Then take care of the other stuff.

4. Don't be afraid to set measurable goals for your website

Your website can be an active part of your business plan. In fact it should be. Don't just view it as your extended business card or think that a graphic redesign is going to help you attract new customers/clients/members. Your website should be assigned targets just like every other department in your organization. And don't just go for easily measurable numbers. Merely increasing the number of visitors is a poor goal. Shortening the sales process is better. Increasing your conversion rates is great. Streamlining logistics is a good goal. Reducing manual intervention in a sales or service process is a good goal, too. And there are dozens of others that have a direct effect on the bottom line – even for companies that don't run an e-commerce site. So get your web team to tell you which needs they have identified, the goals they have set, and how they intend to achieve them. Since most in-house teams have limited experience in web development, this is one of the key reasons for hiring an outside strategic consultant.

Do: Insist that your website become an integrated part of your company's business activities.

5. Don't confuse your needs with those of your visitors

You may want your website to communicate your company's values, service offerings, products, or something else entirely. But visitors to your site will have their own agendas. Your web team needs to identify these needs and address them with relevant content and functionality. The simple truth is, unless a site fulfills the needs of its visitors, it will never fulfill the needs of the site owner. Give your web team the time and budget to do their homework and actually talk to potential users. Very few companies truly understand how their customers use the internet.

Do: Encourage research. Accept surprises that go against your basic assumptions.

6. Don't view your website as a fixed-term project

Your website is a process, not a project. Unlike a printed brochure that might have a useful lifetime of a year or so, your site's content should be reviewed regularly (even daily) so that it remains accurate, interesting, and dynamic. For the most part, maintenance only takes a few minutes a day. But someone has to keep the process going, studying the statistics that tell you who has visited and what they did, and adjusting the content so that it becomes even more compelling. And that means you need to allocate resources to this critical task. Your website needs to be included in your annual budget each and every year.

Do: Once you start the process, make sure to keep it going.

7. Don't confuse print design with web design

You probably have an ad agency. For them, "concept" means look and feel. But on the web, the "concept" is what your site can do. Your brand consists of how your website "acts" just as your brand is affected by how your employees act. Don't let an old-school art director force you to sacrifice usability for the sake of a design guide developed for printed communications.

Do: Acknowledge and embrace web best-practices that run counter to your design guide.

8. Don't let personal opinion cloud your focus.

When it comes to websites, everyone has an opinion. But don't just assign tasks to the people who are most enthusiastic or most vocal. Instead, find people with proven expertise and then do everything you can to help them do their jobs efficiently. And as the project progresses, try not to let your personal taste get in the way either. The only opinions that really matter are those of your website's visitors – not your friends, family, or the well-meaning wife of the chairman. Ask yourself: "Do I want to get my way or do I want to get rich?"

Do: Seek out proven experts and support their work.

9. Don't be afraid to ask stupid questions.

There are no stupid questions. And no one should make you feel like you've asked one. But be prepared to remember the answer – asking someone to walk you through the same subject six times is bound to create friction.

Do: If in doubt, ask. Always.

10. Don't hide in your office.

Your active support for a web project can make the difference between success and failure. Make sure everyone on the team is pulling their weight – particularly those who are responsible for writing and updating online content. Make sure the team leader has access to you when policy questions arise. That said, don't become a micromanager - hire the best and let them get on with it.

Do: Demonstrate your active support for the project. Keep the whole team inspired.