

Eight Steps to Improve the Impact of Your Website

World-renowned usability expert, Jacob Neilson <http://www.useit.com> once wrote; *"A website is the most valuable real estate in the world"*. You pay thousands of dollars for a piece of space no larger than a computer screen. Therefore it is important that you use it to its maximum potential. Here are a few pointers we've put together to help keep you on the right track with your website:

1. Think Content.

Content makes or breaks a site, everything else is secondary. People are not impressed by whistles and bells (which can often act as more of a hindrance than anything – we'll get to that later) – they want info and they want it fast. If your website has a CMS, use it! Change your content; refine your pages, its fast and easy to do. Search engines LOVE sites that have constantly updated content and so will your customers. So go ahead and keep your content fresh.

- If you made a big sale, released a new product or landed a new client, post it in a news section on your site;
- post positive feedback and testimonials your clients email you;
- keep your pricelists and product info up to date and tell people about your new products and why they should use them;
- build a knowledge library of information valuable to clients or people within your industry.

All these things give people a REASON to visit and revisit your site.

2. Name your pages wisely.

Don't expect users to click into pages just to see what's inside. They won't. The sites we build for our clients use a directory structure based on the names of pages and their categories to help search engines such as Google effectively track the content of your site. Google also looks at the title of the page itself. Therefore if a page on your site is about horses, put the word 'horses' in the page title. Repeat the keyword 'horses' as often as possible (without sounding silly) in your site text and Google will see the word 'horses' in the page title, in the link to your page, repeatedly in the page copy AND in the file path structure on the server. All four areas combine to score BIG POINTS with Google that you otherwise would have missed out on.

3. Organise information intelligently.

When collecting copy for a site, lots of people just write out pages and pages of words, paste them in the site and click save. Again, this mode of thinking is based on the premise that people have nothing better to do than sit around and read your website. They don't and they won't. So organise the information on your site logically. You should group pages into collective categories. Drop down menu's are good for this. The individual Pages should then be logically named and ordered, and finally the content on each page should be broken into small, concise pieces summarised by headings. Where possible, avoid paragraphs altogether and use bullet points.

4. Spare a thought for your users' eyes.

The further from left-to-right a user's eye has to track to read a line of text, the more eye-strain is experienced and the less likely a user will be to continue reading. This is why newspapers print articles in narrow

columns. It's also why newspapers use serif fonts. On the internet, we don't have the same luxury of smooth serif fonts, and reading off a screen is harder than off paper, so it's crucial that information is kept to the point. Use pictures and diagrams with your copy to visually underpin your points. Adding pictures is a great way to narrow the text column and make the text easier to read. A few years ago users wouldn't scroll more than one page of text – this was because computer mice didn't have scroll wheels. Latest tests now show that with the advent of the scroll wheel, users will scroll down several pages if you have their attention – so don't be worried if narrow text columns create extra scrolling. The pros of the additional imagery and reduced eyestrain should outweigh the cons of scrolling. Of course, if you do have a large amount of text you need to store online, consider offering it as a PDF that can provide serif fonts and is easier to print and read.

5. Avoid 'fancy things'.

Generally speaking, (and there are ALWAYS exceptions) elements such as music, animation, popup windows, flash intros, splash pages, etc are a pain to users. The latest usability research has actually found animated elements, or elements that appear to be advertising are completely disregarded by most users. As internet users, we've been subliminally conditioned to scan a page and omit anything that looks like an ad. When people scan your page they're looking for information, not banners, so try to avoid making that information too fancy. Just give them the facts they need.

- Limit animation
- Never use music (which affects load time and is distracting), etc
- Avoid fancy fonts, colourful text, etc,

6. Be consistent with your text and layout.

Remember that web users enjoy websites that they feel familiar with. When a site behaves consistently, the user can spend less time trying to decipher the site and more time absorbing information. For this reason text styles, in particular, are very important. The same type-face, alignment and font colour should be used on all pages, links should always appear as links and be made obvious to users. Using different coloured text to draw attention to information is a bad idea because it confuses users who will assume the colour signifies a link. Instead, bold key points (which Google will also detect) or use coloured information box (but ensure it is consistent on each page and doesn't look too much like a banner ad.

7. Promote your site, to promote your business.

If you have a good site, that you're happy with, promote it EVERYWHERE! Every time you take out an ad, direct people to your site for more info. Put it on your stationary, put it on your email signatures and get it out there. Google will measure the rank of your site by how many other sites on the internet link to your site. So if you take out a magazine ad, enquire as to the possibility of a link from the magazine companies website (most magazines now have online profiles for their clients), submit your site to DMOZ (www.dmoz.com - the directory system that drives Google), ask your supplies or clients to put links to your site from their sites (writing testimonials often helps) and most importantly, download the Google toolbar from the Google website, and use it to monitor your Page Rank (PR). Anything 4 / 10 or higher is considered reasonably good. If you still aren't getting

good results from Google, re-investigate your keywords. Check out www.sitereportcard.com to get a free report generated for your site.

8. Beware of SEO.

SEO stands for Search Engine Optimisation. There's good ways to SEO, such as the techniques listed above, and there's very very bad ways. Some of the traps of SEO include joining Link or 'affiliate' Farms, where you pay hundreds or even thousands of (non-refundable) dollars, to have hundreds of fake websites link back to your website to improve your Google Rank. If Google catches you doing this (as it often does) you will be banned. If Yahoo catches you doing this, you will be banned forever. Google now also penalise sites that it believes are getting lots of external links too quickly. If your site is properly designed and maintained, and you ensure it's promoted on the web by 'legitimate' suppliers, clients and directories, your PR will improve with organic growth. Trying to cheat Google is not the way to improve your rank it's a path fraught with danger.