

# Bending the Web to Your Will

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## What are the benefits to your business of a website?

A website is now widely accepted as an essential tool in the marketing armoury of any business, to be used in most cases, alongside printed material. The particular advantages of the web as a marketing and communication tool are:

### It's very cost effective

Once your site is established, it costs very little to reach out to a massive group of potential and existing customers all day, every day. Edits and updates are instantaneous and require minimal time and cost when compared with printed materials.

### It allows great flexibility and responsiveness

Provided you either manage your own content, or have a reliable webmaster, a website allows you to respond instantly to changing circumstances and communicate up to the minute information to customers. Consider the examples of a change in opening hours on a public holiday, a special, limited period promotion to coincide with a local event, or maybe last minute availability of spaces on a course.

### Your customers expect it

...and may question your professionalism if they can't 'Google' you.

## So what makes a "good" website? Design, usability and understanding your visitors

### Accessibility

A good website should look good to your visitors and be easy to use regardless of whether they use a PC or a Mac, regardless of their screen resolution, regardless of what browser they use (Internet Explorer, Firefox, Safari etc.) and regardless, believe it or not, of whether they have physical or visual impairments. Sites MUST be tested across as many browser/operating systems as possible.

#### Common Pitfalls

An extreme case of failure on this front is a site produced using Microsoft FrontPage, or worse, Microsoft Publisher. They only work in Internet Explorer on a PC, excluding approximately 30% (and growing) of all Internet traffic. Flash websites also generally fall short in this department as, although they display consistently on most machines, they exclude visually impaired visitors who use screen-reading software, which can't read Flash sites, and also don't allow less severely impaired visitors to resize text to their liking.

### Speed

Your visitors have 2 second attention spans! If you keep them waiting while your Flash animations and large image files load, they'll be gone before you can even introduced yourself.

#### Common Pitfalls

Heavily animated Flash sites, and un-optimised images. Jpegs should be resized and compressed before uploading; never taken direct from a camera and forced down to size.

### Navigation

A good site must be easy to navigate and should politely direct your visitors to wherever *you* want them to go, without preventing them from going wherever *they* want to go. This can be achieved with careful planning of website structure and layout.

#### Common Pitfalls

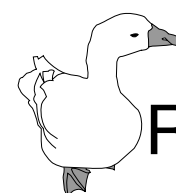
Dead end pages - just like road signage in the south of England, it's disorientating to find yourself on a page with no indication of how you arrived or how to return (including where navigation has moved or is hidden by overgrown foliage!).

### Aesthetics and Identity

Your customers WILL make judgments about your professionalism and values based on their experience of your website. If it fails any of the above criteria, they will leave quickly, feeling irritated, with a poor impression of your business. The most immediately influential factor however is the appearance of the site as this will affect every single one of your visitors and will profoundly influence their impression of you both consciously and sub-consciously. It must be instantly identifiable with your business through carefully incorporated corporate identity and must look professional and appropriate.

#### Common Pitfalls

Trying too hard to 'break the mould' (resulting in disorientation), being inconsistent (resulting in disorientation) and using 'out-of-the-box' solutions based using templates that bear no relevance to your own business identity.



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## Taking your first steps or considering a redesign?

The options available to many small and start-up businesses can be severely limited by budget, but trying to build your own website or pay your neighbour's nephew to do it for pocket money will almost certainly bring you face to face with one or many of the common pitfalls overleaf. If you really can't afford to hire a professional to design your site, it's still possible to create a web presence for your business that will guarantee you immunity at least from the technical pitfalls of a poorly constructed site. How? Get a blog. Personally, I would highly recommend Wordpress, but Typepad and Blogger also offer good alternatives. You will find some useful links at the bottom of the third page.

### What is a blog?

'Blog' is an abbreviation of 'web log'. Essentially it is designed to be an online diary, inviting interaction in the form of responsive comments from visitors. This may not sound like a conventional corporate brochure website, and it's not, but with a little exploration of the tools provided with your blog, you should discover that you can simply use it as a tool for publishing content, and not allow visitors to contribute. The benefit to you of using a blog as your own website, is that the pages are already correctly formed from a search engine and accessibility point of view. You just add the content.

All three of the blogs above will allow you to use their services without having your own hosting and domain registration. Typepad will charge you for the privilege, but the other two allow free basic accounts. Should you use this service, the web address of your site will be something like <http://rudegoose.wordpress.com>. If you would prefer for your visitors to visit your blog at your own domain (eg. <http://www.rudegoose.com>), you may either pay Typepad or Wordpress to register the domain for you (Blogger don't seem to allow or this) or with Wordpress only, you may install the whole blog on your own independent hosting account, although be warned that you are likely to need help with the setup process and as a database is required, will need more than most budget hosting accounts will offer.

### Want to sell your products online?

As much as an ordinary website presents booby traps at every turn, the consequences are relatively minor. Your site may perform poorly in search engine rankings, or some of your visitors may not see your pages quite as intended. If you want to start taking payments for your products or services through your website however, you **MUST** seek professional advice as the consequences to you and your customers of any technical shortcomings in your site are very much more serious and may have legal implications. Ecommerce sites can not be built well and cheap!

### Ecommerce on a shoestring?

Much the same way as you can use a pre-formed system like a blog to get a reliably functional website, there are many ways for beginners to sell online without the expense and risk of selling through their own site. The obvious example here is eBay. An additional benefit of such sites is that your customers will be delivered on a plate. Millions of eBay customers throughout the world have instant access to your products and you to their custom as soon as you upload a product. Many other more specialised portals exist to provide a one stop shop for customers and a convenient platform for sellers. If you make high quality, hand made goods for example, you might consider Etsy ([www.etsy.com](http://www.etsy.com)). All of these services will take a cut of your sales, but then so would your merchant bank and payment gateway were you to sell through your own site.

### I want to have my site designed and built professionally. Who's going to do a good job?

The millions of poorly designed, under-performing and downright bad websites floating around the web today are testament to the fact that this is a very good question. Before I begin to advise you on what to look for in a web designer, consider the magic trio of **GOOD**, **CHEAP** and **QUICK**. You can only ever have a maximum of two of these at any one time!

The trouble most business owners face when selecting a web designer is that they have little or no understanding of the web, or what makes a website successful or otherwise. And why would they? You could compare the scenario to somebody looking to buy a car, in a world with no 'What Car' magazine or Top Gear, in a totally unregulated automobile industry where the majority of cars produced are by cottage industry manufacturers in their own garages. What a nightmare! You can see pretty much what any car looks like superficially, but without expert knowledge, you're not going to be able to predict anything about its performance.

### Do your research

The only solution (although nothing's guaranteed) is to research several designers. A good place to start is by collecting a list of competitors' and other sites that you like, and that you can see are successful. Google results obviously should instantly show you which sites are well built for search engine performance. Do take recommendations from friends and associates who have had a good experience with a particular designer, but check them out thoroughly for yourself. Any good web designer should have a decent body of work on display in their portfolio. Look through this for something that fits your requirements. For example, if you need an Ecommerce site, don't choose a web designer who can't produce examples of Ecommerce sites they have created. If you require a highly customised solution, look for a developer who is used to developing custom sites, rather than being restricted by out-of-the-box solutions (and be prepared to pay more for it).

Unfortunately there is as yet very little in the way of a 'Which Web Designer' magazine. UKWDA (UK Web Designers Association) like all that I have come across, have no entry requirements. One fairly useful resource however is [www.whichwebdesigncompany.co.uk](http://www.whichwebdesigncompany.co.uk), who add value to their database by collecting much more information from participating companies, including allowing customers to review them.



## Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)

Search engine ranking is an obsession for many and a source of deep frustration for others. Myths abound about how to achieve those illusive top spots, perpetuated frequently by a few rogue SEO 'professionals'. Realistically though, for most smallish businesses, search engine optimisation is not that complicated - just quite labour intensive. This is why the pursuit of improved Google rank can be so expensive, yet it is attainable by most ordinary site owners with minimal technical skills and a great deal of perseverance.

### Here's roughly how it works (using Google as our example)

Google's 'index' is a HUGE electronic library of all of the web pages it has found on the web. To keep its library up to date with new pages and updates to existing pages, Google sends 'spiders' (little programmes) to crawl round all the known pages in the web, taking snapshots of the content of each, and following any links they find to new pages. When these 'spiders' visit a page, they don't see a visual representation of it like we do through our browsers. They see what you would if you looked at the source code of the page. You'll be familiar with this if you know any HTML. This means that any text that is contained in images or Flash files isn't seen as meaningful text, just an object.

When you type a search term in to your Google box and click 'search', Google search through their library for all of the pages they've found that contain your search term and deliver them to you in a list. What we're interested in is in what order they are displayed. This is determined by many, many factors.

## There are three fundamental aspects of SEO

### Site construction

Before you invest your valuable time trying to improve your rank, check that your site will actually allow the search engines in when they arrive. If your site either uses *frames*, uses *Flash* for navigation and/or content or uses *images* for content, your content simply will not be found by Google. This is not entirely true of frames, which merely make information more difficult to find and also present it in a distorted manner.

### Keywords in content

The biggest SEO myths surround keywords. It's not just a case of entering a few keywords in a box somewhere, to tell the search engines what you would like to rank highly for please! Can you imagine how that would work with millions of clamoring sites? Keywords are all about *content!* If you want to rank for it, write about it. Good advice for local businesses is to make sure there are plenty of references to your local area in your content. This will deliver you more relevant hits from people who are actually looking for services in your area. You might rank in the millions for 'florist', but you could still be first for 'florist in Haslemere' if you get your wording right. It's not just about frequency of these words though. Placement is also important. If you have control of your site construction, placing your keywords in header tags, links, lists, page titles and file names is much better than just padding out your paragraphs with them.

### Links

Having decided that your page is full of the keyword search term in question, Google still have to decide how important your site is. A large part of how they do this is by counting how many other web pages link to yours and how many pages link to them and so on. Each link to a page counts as a vote of confidence in your page by the linking page. It's also critical that the linking page contains content that is relevant to the search term.

To help to quantify this 'importance', Google assign each page a rank from 0-10. 3-4 is fairly good, although for very competitive terms you will need a higher rank to be listed highly in the results, and vice versa. To see the rank of each page you visit, you simply need to download Google's free toolbar (address below). This will help you to decide which directories are worth adding your business to, and which sites are worth exchanging links with.

To help you on your way with DIY search engine optimisation, there are vast resources on the web (just Google it). You may also find Rude Goose's own article (address below) useful.

Some useful addresses

Google Toolbar: <http://toolbar.google.com> (attaches to your browser and provides information about your current page)

Google Tools: <http://www.google.com/webmasters/tools> (information about your own site from Google's perspective)

Google Analytics: <http://google.com/analytics> (free comprehensive web statistics tool)

Statcounter: <http://www.statcounter.com> (similar to Analytics but more limited and easier)

DIY SEO: [http://www.rudegoose.com/diy\\_seo.htm](http://www.rudegoose.com/diy_seo.htm) (article about DIY SEO)

Which Web Design Company?: <http://www.whichwebdesigncompany.co.uk>

eBay: <http://www.ebay.co.uk>

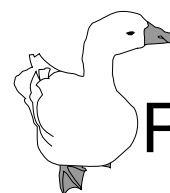
Etsy: <http://www.etsy.com>

Wordpress: <http://www.wordpress.com>

Typepad: <http://www.typepad.com>

Blogger: <http://www.blogger.com>

MySpace: <http://www.myspace.com> (alternative way to publish your information)



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