ASA Professional Development Seminars

Coming to Grips with New Technology:
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Part 1: Digital Strategy & Planning

What is out there and is it right for me?

Before embarking on your web project, it is important to first give ample time over to developing an overall plan to help guide your site development. A strong digital strategy can significantly reduce development time (and as a result, costs), draw focus to the goals you want your site to achieve and direct relevant content to a specific audience.

What is your website’s purpose?

This question can be answered with something as simple as brainstorming key words, discussing imagery that relates to your feelings about the project, or an analysis of competitor weakness that directed you to the project in the first place.

It is essential to have a statement of purpose that you can constantly refer to over your website’s lifetime to ensure that the decisions you make are in line with this overarching principle.

These processes and outcomes will need to be revisited over time as your site develops. You may decide certain elements, that initially seemed important to your site’s success, are no longer viable or a better alternative has presented itself. Setting specific time periods for reassessment of the site’s goals (bi-monthly, 6 monthly etc.) helps ensure your site’s function, content and purpose remain relevant.

Communication goals (measurable outcomes for your website), what it should do for you/ your business

- Number of hits per week/month
- Number of newsletter/feed subscribers
- Site referrals
- Search engine ranking
- Online sales

These indicators can be measured in a number of ways. Google offers very detailed analytics as a free tool (http://www.google.com/analytics/).

If Google (and their privacy policy) doesn’t suit, then there are a number of paid options such as Mint (http://haveamint.com/) & Woopra (http://www.woopra.com/) that offer very detailed stats. If you have your own web hosting, they will often have one or more built in stat services that you can take advantage of but are often quite basic.

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These statistics are only as good as your ability to interpret them in relation to your site to get their true value. It used to be that page hits were considered an accurate indicator of a site’s success (remember those little hit counters sitting at the bottom of every site in 1996?), but with more sophisticated data collection came the realisation that factors like repeat visits, time on the site, popular page views and location became intrinsic to defining a site’s success. Thousands of hits per-day might seem good, but not if users are leaving the site after a second or two. Alternatively, a low hit count may indicate failure but not if users are spending a long time on the site as they are engaging with your content.

**Users: Who are we catering for?**

Identifying your audience aids in building your online presence in a number of ways.

Firstly, deciding who you are creating your content for is a very good guide for what type of online presence to develop. If your goal is purely to provide a point of contact then a single page site with basic information and an email address/phone number is all you need (almost like an online business card). On the other hand, a photographer or illustrator who is looking for work likely needs to create a folio site with a range of work to attract prospective clients. Further to this, the design of the folio needs to reflect the type of work & ideal customers you would like to attract (flashy and sleek, or simple and refined etc.). Deciding on the range of your audience can help dictate the type of content you create. If you want to focus on one particular audience then you develop content using language that speaks directly to those people. If you are creating content or services because you have identified an need that isn’t being filled in the market, this makes you the perfect candidate for the kind of person you want to market to. Alternatively, considering larger potential groups can open you up to more varied opportunities for contact and often discover groups you may not have considered.

**Establishing constraints: Project timeframe, Budgets & Time commitment**

Having a specific timeframe for your web project acts as a decision-making guide when assessing what core elements are required in your website. A simple blog can be set up in minutes, but if you require an elegant, content managed site with numerous pages of unique content then be prepared for a number of months at the least till it is launched.

Your budget will guide your project in a number of ways. In its simplest form, you have a certain amount of money to spend and you do your best to get the most value out of that. Alternatively, you may have a ball-park figure or an ideal budget and your strategy & planning can help dictate where best to spend that. An important consideration, especially for a start-up project, is using an iterative process where you build a site with a few core features and, after launching, assess their value over time. This allows you to further develop these features, add additional functionality or remove features that may not be working. Using an iterative process means you don’t throw all your money in at the beginning on features that are yet to prove their worth.

Furthermore, the amount of time you have each day/week to commit to your website will determine what site functionality you require and how you position yourself on the web. Do you require a blog or a Twitter account if you only plan to update it every month or two?
Will your content constantly change (requiring a Content Management System) or will a static site suffice? Do you need a newsletter if no one is reading it?

**Establishing Requirements: What does the website need to do to achieve the communication goals (E-commerce, Blog, Twitter, Facebook, newsletters, Content Management etc.)**

Now that you have spent time considering your goals, audience, budgets & timeframes you'll hopefully have a clearer idea of what you want your online presence to be. You can now begin compiling your site's requirements and deciding which ones are the most important. Physically listing all the functions you think you will need, then organising them into hierarchical groups going from essential elements to, ‘maybe someday’ or ‘not necessary’ ensures you are creating the most effective web presence for you at that time. This can be done individually, but inviting people close to the project to participate creates an environment where your decisions are questioned and requires you to rationalise those choices.

**Part 2: Where do I go from here?**

You have a basic strategy in place and an idea of the approach you would like to take, so how do you achieve this? Below are some options and price points that aim to get you started. These figures are broad examples based on my professional experience.

**Free:**

There are numerous services that offer free & somewhat customisable site options. Most started out as purely blogging services but have now added the functionality to add static pages of content and social media plugins.

Wordpress: [http://www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com)
Tumblr: [http://www.tumblr.com](http://www.tumblr.com)

If you have products to sell, there are free (or sales percentage based) options available from:


**Small investment: $20-$200**

Many of the above options offer paid versions, with greater customisation choices, hosting and e-commerce functionality.

[http://squarespace.com](http://squarespace.com)

A further option in the small investment option is purchasing your own domain name and mapping it to one of the above services (most offer this for free or a nominal extra fee). This option does require some modification to domain settings and not all domain services offer full customisation (or require an add-on domain control package). Wordpress, for...
example, offer to register the domain name and map it to your site for $20-$25 per year (exchange rate-dependent).

Some domain registrars:

http://www.netregistry.com.au
http://www.webcity.com.au

A further option when purchasing your domain name is that you can map an email address to Google (Gmail) and have a custom email address for no extra cost (many hosts will offer this option for a nominal yearly fee) - http://www.ehow.com/how_4788558_use-gmail-domain-name.html

Medium investment: $200-$1500

This price range is fairly flexible and could be spent in any number of ways:

- **Do it yourself:** There are many short courses offered to give you a good primer to start creating your own site. This could be focused on a number of outcomes; Creating your own site from scratch or learning basic HTML/CSS skills so you can edit existing templates on sites like Wordpress/Tumblr etc.


- **Approach a web professional** to help set up the basics of your site and provide a simple template implementation. Many bigger companies will offer package deals with a lot of talk about SEO and unique designs - this is generally rubbish marketing speak. There are numerous small, local designers & developers out there who can help you at any level of requirement & are more interested in providing what they can within your budget without producing ‘cookie cutter’ websites.

Going down either path will most likely mean you’ll need some **hosting** to get your site online. One important thing to consider when looking at hosting and domain names is to use separate services for both. Often, companies will offer package deals with both domain and hosting. The problem with this is that you may decide that one service is not up to scratch. Having both services with the one company makes it difficult to swap to an alternative service (& often involves release fees). Another very important thing to consider is what sort of site you will be building, and whether the specific host has the technology to support it.

The hosting recommendations below are based purely on my professional work experience - I strongly recommend seeking second opinions which can be found on Whirlpool Forums ([http://forums.whirlpool.net.au/](http://forums.whirlpool.net.au/)):


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**Full bespoke investment: $3000 +**

This is the option for those who feel their website will be their main source of promotion/income and requires a full site development project. This generally includes identity & interface design, development and implementation/training. I strongly suggest using a local design/development team as face-to-face interactions will help achieve your final goals immensely.

Just be aware of bigger agencies who charge high fees to cover big overheads & don’t be afraid to ask where the design and development is being done (I have many horror stories of outsourced jobs going badly).

Below are two sites I visit regularly and feel really highlight the value of spending time & money with good designers & developers to create a unique web experience for your users.

Bobulate: [http://bobulate.com/](http://bobulate.com/) (the content is so good it is easy to miss the elegant, simple design)

Jason Santa Maria: [http://jasonsantamaria.com/](http://jasonsantamaria.com/) (A custom design/layout for every post)

**Social Media**

The most important question to consider when looking at social media engagement is ‘Do I really need this in my life?’. There will always be some new form of social media taking the world by storm that everyone jumps on board because they don’t want to be left behind. However, unless you see an intrinsic, measurable value to using a certain social media for your site or business, then is it really worth it? Consider the time it takes to become an active participant on forums, Twitter or Facebook. In many cases, having an account that you don’t use can be more damaging to your online perception than not engaging at all. You will be much better off selecting one social media outlet to concentrate on if a number means spreading yourself too thin.

If you do decide to delve into social media, be wary. Much like your real world professional reputation, these types of media are a form of online persona. There are numerous stories of careers and lives being affected by online behavior so don’t publish anything online that you wouldn’t be comfortable doing or saying in real life.

**Content**

“If there’s an ecosystem where things are free (such as, say, the internet) your currency becomes enthusiasm. Quality is important because it gives people a legitimate reason to become excited. Sincerity is what creates the line between real enthusiasm and empty hype.” - Frank Chimero ([http://ideas.frankchimero.com/](http://ideas.frankchimero.com/))

“(Content) is hard to schedule. You can’t put neatly into time slots when you’re going to be annoyed, ecstatic, disappointed, have a great insight or discover a new awesome technique.” - 37 Signals ([http://37signals.com/svn/posts/2358-this-is-not-content](http://37signals.com/svn/posts/2358-this-is-not-content))

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High quality, relevant content is the key to a successful website. It should be (but rarely is) the first thing you think about before embarking on a web project. Here are some things to remember:

- Don’t be afraid to give something away for free. People want to sample the experience, content or product that you offer & if they like what they have sampled then they are more likely to spend money to get more.
- Be committed. Why would anyone read a blog that hasn’t been updated for 6 months? Or, if you have a blog that purely re-blogs other sites’ work, does this add any value to your online presence? Every time you are about to publish something, ask yourself, “is this going to be of value to my page visitors?”
- Why spend your time and money building a great website if your content isn’t of an equal high standard.
- Your content is how people find you. Create something rich & unique and people will want to share it.

SEO (Search Engine Optimisation)

“The problem with SEO is that the good advice is obvious, the rest doesn’t work, and it’s poisoning the web.” - Derek Powazek (http://powazek.com/posts/2090)

SEO has become very big business in the last 5 years and it isn’t surprising - it allows anyone with some money in the bank to get a high ranking on Google (well, for as long as they have the money to pay, that is). SEO ‘experts’ use numerous techniques to exploit loopholes in search engine algorithms to artificially boost rankings. The problem is that search engines change the way they index sites at least every month so you are often paying for a short term gain (and potential punishment if your site gets banned). Not surprisingly, building a logically structured, content rich, accessible website is your best chance for success.

- Search engines read your website much like a blind person. Keywords are indexed hierarchically so semantically organising your content with headings, paragraphs etc. will improve your site’s chances of a higher ranking. For example, the content of a heading tag holds greater weight as a search term than a list item.
- The more links there are to your site, the more chance someone will visit it (and search engines will take more notice, too). Approach similar sites to yours and request a reciprocal link, submit your site to a relevant web directory and use appropriate web forums to alert users of your site. Don’t overdo it, however, as artificially boosting your links by dropping it into every site out there will be flagged by Google and can get you banned/dropped in rankings.
- If you have the resources, you can contact similar sites or organisations and place an advertisement on the site. Many bigger sites offer ad options but be sure to get detailed information about their site stats & visitors to decide whether or not your ad will be reaching the right people.
- Accessibility is not only important in making your content available to everyone it also gives you the opportunity to add further detail to your content ‘under the hood’. The average user won’t see it, but the vision impaired - and search engines - will. This includes:
  - Adding alt text to images - this is a short text description of the image

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• Adding a title to your links - this adds information as to the nature of the link e.g. ‘Go to example 6’.
• Use accurate, keyword based page & post titles.
• Probably the best advice out there comes from Derek Powazek: “Make something great. Tell people about it. Do it again.”  (http://powazek.com/posts/2090) It’s really very simple - if you have something worth looking at, people will find it. It won’t happen overnight (so don’t listen to those who tell you it will!!)

Google offer an in-depth and easy to follow PDF guide to improving your ranking:

Wordpress

Wordpress began as one of the first open-source blogging platforms but has become much more than that. Wordpress.com (what we are looking at in the Seminar) is the free online blogging platform with paid options for upgrading and customisation. Wordpress.org is the open-source, community driven package that more resembles a fully fledged content management system with a plugin for every need. It’s simple and logical back-end user interface makes it a both powerful and desirable to many web publishers.

• Don’t paste content into posts/pages directly from MS Word - it pastes huge amounts of invisible junk code that can stop your content showing up in browsers (Microsoft ones, funnily enough). Your best option is to use the ‘paste as plain text’ option from the Kitchen Sink panel in the Wordpress visual editor.
• Categories are for organisational/archiving purposes and are site specific. They can have longer names. Tags are post content specific words that aim to help people find similar content within your site and act as further keyword terms for search engines.
• Posts are for your dynamic content. They are listed by date/category and show up in RSS (Real Simple Syndication/Rich Site Summary) feeds.
• Pages are for your static content i.e. content that won’t change much, like an ‘About’ page.
• Widgets are a great way of adding additional information to the site and feed information from other sources like Twitter & Flickr.
• You can set the front page, site name and privacy in the Settings tab
• Organise, add further detail to, or delete you site’s images and audio in the Media tab
• Select themes and (template dependent) colours in the Appearance tab
• When preparing media (images/audio/video) ensure it has been prepared for the web. Your aim is to achieve a balance between file size and quality - you need to consider that not all internet users have a high-speed connection. Shrink O’Matic is a useful free tool to compress images: http://toki-woki.net/p/Shrink-O-Matic/ & Audacity is an excellent open-source audio editor for Mac & PC: http://audacity.sourceforge.net/. Flickr: http://www.flickr.com has some great built-in image tools to crop/resize & clean up your images.
• When adding media to your site, ensure that a) you have permission to use it and b) in the case of images, download the file and upload it yourself as linking directly to the file depends on it always being hosted from the same spot.

Troubleshooting
• The Wordpress forums (http://en.forums.wordpress.com/) are a great way to find answers to difficult questions. To avoid drawing the ire of the regular contributors, ensure you have searched thoroughly for answers to your question. Try and be as descriptive as possible and post any relevant images/links/code to help the process.
• Wordpress TV (http://wordpress.tv/) is another excellent resource with numerous video tutorials that take you through the features available in Wordpress.
• It may seem very obvious, but if you have a problem (Wordpress or otherwise), chances are someone has had it before. Your preferred search engine is the best tech help guide out there!