

2 Structuring website content

Many websites fail not because of insufficient advertising, but because of technical errors in the structural design and the content. Menus that wander across the screen are more like a puzzle than a way to establish contact with potential customers.

Overloaded, flickering or blinking Internet pages are comparable to poorly posted road signs. They are not the right way to highlight the most important information and to guide a prospective customer.

The following pages are not intended to be a substitute for custom-designed websites created by advertising or Internet agencies. They should merely serve as basic rules for use in generating specifications to create or revamp a website.

Brief and concise information (content)

We live in a time of information overload. If information is not presented in a concise, focused manner, there is a real danger that the intended message will not be heard. To stand out from the crowd, a company must differentiate its products or services from those of its competitors and concisely present its advantages to the target audience.

User friendliness

Website content should be presented in a clearly structured manner that can be easily and efficiently navigated and that guides a prospect to the required information quickly, directly and concisely. Website visitors rarely accept more than three mouse clicks to find the information they are looking for. Website designs that have too many levels are confusing and if descriptive text is too long, there is a risk that it will not be read. Avoid navigation menus that create the impression you are experimenting, for example, by forcing visitors to change their habits or natural reading order. Images that are too large can also frighten away visitors if they take too long to download. Ensure that visitors are able to find your contact information quickly. Don't hide the information after three mouse clicks. In addition to an e-mail address, contact information should include telephone and fax numbers. It is not enough to only offer communication by e-mail. Customers want to decide for themselves how they will establish contact.

Ways to interact

Identifying prospective customers is the first step toward winning new customers. Whether they have decided to visit your website because of an advertising campaign or were directed there by a search engine is irrelevant. The important thing is that they have been motivated to contact your company. The initial contact may come in the form of a literature request, a request for a phone call from a sales representative or an online order. New customers can only be acquired via a website if interested users have been motivated to interact with the company.

Leave room for dialogue with customers

A good website offers brief, concise information about what you have to offer. In this case, less is often more. If any question can be answered by visiting your website, potential customers have no real reason to establish personal contact. The only way to move closer to closing a sale is to convert an anonymous visitor to a potential customer.

The design of the screen layout follows a different set of rules than a printed brochure

A standard corporate design generates a visual image of your company. This should also be reflected in your Internet presence. Always remember that a properly designed layout merges corporate design and user friendliness. Not every design or style incorporated in a printed brochure is suitable for use on a website. For example, background images that cover two sides of a double-page spread in a brochure are totally unsuitable for use as the background image on a website. Elements that generate a good impression in a brochure can lead to catastrophic download difficulties on a website. Background images are only suitable for use on the Internet if they are kept small and can be used in a repetitive manner, similar to a wallpaper pattern.

Highlight information in small doses

Moving or animated images can be used to highlight important information. This should be their only purpose. If all information were equally highlighted, the Internet page would come across as too

busy and even annoying. In addition, the main purpose of highlighting would be lost; namely, emphasising important content.

Proper architecture for a website

You can use the Internet to skilfully present packages of information, in a way that does not overwhelm a visitor, as long as you adhere to the rules for this medium. This is quite easy if you use proper text architecture. The basic principle is to dissect the information and present visitors with exactly what they are looking for. Provide headings and brief summaries for those who have little time, and in-depth descriptions for those who require more detailed information. Specialists break this down into **headlines** (headings with advertising content), **abstracts** (brief, concise descriptions), **full text** (additional, in-depth information) and **field prompts**, which guide your visitors by inviting them to call back or place an order (see chapter: "Improving customer interaction via the Internet").

Include a description with symbols

Symbols can quickly help users find exactly what they are looking for at a particular Internet site. However, use caution when selecting the symbols as there are only a few that mean the same thing to people of all cultures. An upraised thumb can be interpreted as satisfaction for good performance or it can signify a major insult. Even if your customers are all from the same cultural background, you should not overestimate the ability of every individual to derive the same meaning from a particular symbol. When using symbols, make it easy for the viewer and ensure they are accompanied by simple, descriptive words. Your visitors will be thankful.

Create editorial content that matches the theme of the website

Thematically appropriate and interesting editorial content on a website emphasises a company's technical expertise and professionalism and generates a positive impression of product and service offerings.

Use hidden information (meta tags) to improve search engine rankings

Internet search engines are the most effective way for millions of users to find information. It is no wonder then that most companies try to achieve the best possible search engine ranking for their website. An important cornerstone of good ranking is the so-called meta tag (see Chapter "Correct use of search engine listing criteria for improved ranking"). However, since these are normally located in a section of a website's programming code that is not immediately visible, they are often neglected. Understanding this subject and consciously applying the rules can lead to a better search engine ranking at no cost.

Content suitability for quick and easy modification

Keeping content up-to-date is an essential component of a successful website. If online information is not well maintained, visitors will not come back a second time. You do not need to be an HTML expert to keep your website up-to-date. There are many ways to quickly and easily update the content yourself and avoid hiring expensive third-party service providers. Just use an appropriate content management system.

Beware of eavesdropping: do not transmit critical data across the Internet unless it is encrypted

It is essential to transmit confidential data in encrypted form to prevent unauthorised access to this information, especially when it comes to critical website content that should only be accessible within an authorised user circle. This does not mean you need to be an expert in encryption. A popular, proven methodology already exists: SSL (secure socket layer) encryption. SSL encryption works based on the principle of two matching keys (one for the website owner and one for the customer). This pair of keys, The SSL certificate, can be acquired for your domain without any special knowledge of the encryption procedure. You can recognise a secure SSL transmission by the supplementary "s" attached to the Internet address protocol definition ("https://www....") and by the small closed lock symbol in the lower border of your browser.

Compulsory legal notice for a website

Companies who operate a website for business purposes are legally obligated to publish certain specified information as part of the website content. This applies even if the website is only used to publish information or to establish a company's identification. The information required depends on the type of company, the business it conducts and its legal form.

A visitor to the website must be able to find the required information easily. It is therefore a good idea to include a specially marked location called "About us (legal notice)" as part of the website. This legally prescribed information about the company must also be published when distributing e-mails to clients and prospective customers.

The following lists the most important particulars for the "About us" page independent of the legal form of the company.

“About us” page (legal notice)

- Company name
- Contact
- Street address
- City / Postal Code
- Phone
- Fax
- E-mail
- Job title and rules of conduct (only for trades and freelancers)
- Executive management/executive board/ownership
- Trade registration
- District court
- Supervisory board, supervisory board chairman (only for a corporation)

- Supervisory authority/chamber (only for trades and freelancers)
- Tax ID
- Value added tax number (only for exporting companies)

The above list is very general and may not apply depending on the legal form of the company

Legal disclaimer for hyperlinks (cross references) to a third-party website

Websites should also include a legal disclaimer for hyperlinks that point to third-party websites. Since such notices can often be interpreted as an awareness of wrongdoing, we recommend using the following brief wording.

Legal disclaimer:

Despite careful content verification, we are not responsible for the content of third-party sites. The owners of linked sites are exclusively responsible for their content.

A good place to put this legal disclaimer may be in the "About us" section we recommended earlier.

Integrating general terms and conditions into an online shop

Companies that operate an online shop are obligated to publish their general terms and conditions in an easily accessible location of their website, preferably linked to the online ordering process.

Please note that e-commerce also requires compliance with the following items:

- A comprehensive explanation of the type, scope and purpose of the stored data that is required to execute the transaction.

- A notice regarding the customer's right of refusal to allow company retention of said data.

- A legal disclaimer for distance contracts that states the customer's right to refuse or return the purchased goods without stating any reasons. This excludes customised or specially cut products, newspapers/magazines and data media (software) for which the package has been opened.

Note:

The authors make no claims regarding the completeness of these recommendations and do not claim to act as a replacement for proper legal counsel. In case of doubt, we recommend that you seek legal advice from an Internet law specialist.

Summary

Structuring website content

- Less is more. This also applies to information provided for visitors. Articulate the advantages of your products in a brief, concise manner.
- Avoid experimenting and keep hierarchical layers to a minimum. Be careful with large images that result in lengthy download times.
- Use moving and animated images sparingly and **only** to highlight important information.
- Avoid providing answers to all questions on your website. Leave room to establish personal contact.
- Use content management systems to help keep the website regularly maintained at a low cost.
- Be sure to use SSL encryption to prevent "eavesdroppers" from accessing critical data.
- Use meta tags to achieve a good ranking in search engine listings.
- Make sure you have an "About us" section on your website, which you can also use to publish legally required

information about your company (in addition to contact information; e.g., trade registry or tax ID).

- Be sure to include a legal disclaimer if your website has hyperlinks to third-party web pages.
- If you operate an online shop, you must publish your general terms and conditions on your website.