What People Want From Their Websites

I recently surveyed a group of website owners, mainly to get some insight into satisfaction with our services. I promised I would reveal the results in an article online, so here it is.

Before I get into those details, I wanted to reflect on some observations I have made over twenty years in this business.

From the very start, when I began building websites, clients wanted to know if they could make their own changes once their site went live. They didn't want to learn to code or anything of the sort, they simply wanted access to edit their website like it was a text document, just as they would did with Word.

Apart from the difficulty of explaining the vagaries of web coding, offering a viable solution was problematic. I could only steer them in the direction of programs like Macromedia Contribute, or worse, that abominable scourge of scourges, Microsoft Frontpage.

Along with that, the average computer user couldn't seem to comprehend the fundamental point of a website, that it's a document you can view on any device, on any operating system, all you need to view it is a web browser. That's why you can't edit it like a Word document, it has to meet a lot of requirements to show up on a screen.

Furthermore, when they did go to work, I often ended up having to lend assistance, or patch things up after they had finished. I'm sure they were trying their best, but they struggled with the software and the software struggled with slow connections (this was pre-broadband), while there were still basic concepts people couldn't grasp. It just wasn't working very well.

So something had to be done. I had already messed around with WordPress, I dabbled with Typo3, Joomla and some others, but WordPress seemed the best way to go and I began introducing it, setting up live sites with it and learning as much about it as I could, continuing to the present day, where we use it as a basis for custom designs.

So now, while people like the idea they can edit their own website, I find that most don't. For some it's because they find it difficult learning how to use WordPress, some try and only manage to master a basic understanding, while some genuinely can't find the time.

While we're on the subject, we have WordPress running because it does a lot of stuff for you. Please just edit the text and add pictures, don't go changing font styles and colours, your giant purple Times New Roman and your bold Comic Sans are totally incongruous with the carefully chosen sitewide styles I have spent hours on, ensuring a consistent structure.

If you must put a heading where it really doesn't belong, use the H1, H2, H3 and so on formatting tools that are built in. That will ensure it matches the rest of the design and importantly, it aids visually impaired visitors.

The Survey

And so to the public's valued opinions.

The first question in the survey was "What do you see as the main purpose of your website?" with 68% of respondents stating the primary purpose is to "provide information".

While that may sound a bit obvious, the alternatives of "To sell a product", "Have an online ad" and "I have one because everybody does", I thought would get more votes. Only 24% actually said they use their website primarily to sell a product, so I think I need to spend some time extolling the virtues of ecommerce.

Keeping that information readily available it seems, is not so important, because a staggering 65% only want it maintained when it needs changes. And 13% only want it worked on when something goes wrong. Wouldn't think there's much valuable information going to be available there.

This thinking is a terrible indictment of people's attitudes to their online presence. If it was a billboard on the freeway and they saw a mark on it they'd be on the phone to the provider straight away, but it's okay to let their single most prominent form of advertising run down.

Think I'm exaggerating the prominence bit? It tells people what you are providing or selling. It's there 24 hours a day, seven days a week, all year round. No matter what state it's in, people will at some stage see it and summarily judge your business.

For some of my clients, if it were a car, it's never been serviced since they bought it, the tyres are bald, it rattles, leaks oil, there are holes in the exhaust and the music is played on a cassette. But it still works fine!

Apart from the obvious updating of content, there is also the issue of keeping the platform up to date. The fact is, it's software. It's code and databases, run by sophisticated, reliable server machinery and applications, that are constantly updated to ensure reliability and performance, the kind of performance you expect and whinge about if it occasionally trips over.

This is why your happy little WordPress website needs it's core and plugins updated regularly. You can do it yourself, it's all there in front of you when you log in, in highlighted bright orange or blue buttons. You err, do log in sometimes don't you?

Now if you don't run those updates, that's fine, I'm very happy to do them for you, but please accept this can sometimes take half an hour, sometimes more and that is not what your web hosting payment is for, that's just your rent for using my server space.

I don't fill your fridge with food and pay for your petrol as well, so please be aware that the amount you are charged for me tidying things up is a pittance compared to the figure you'll pay when it goes belly up due to a hack attack, spam attack or an outdated plugin. Yeah, I know you needed it back up and running yesterday. Ahem.

The Website Improvements question provided some really interesting answers, with some complaints about spam and some great suggestions like audio streaming, video or just plain rebuilds. Good folk, you have but to ask, I am here.

The next question "What is most important regarding website functionality?" was not multiple choice, but asked to rate the importance of each item from 1 to 5. Over 86% of you said looks are important, well done, correct answer and 92% said it should be easy to navigate, again, good work. Just remember the Comic Sans and the Times New Roman don't help either of those.

Ah yes, the importance of having access to update it yourself. 55% said that's very important. If only you would actually then proceed do do so. At least the 2.6% who said it's not important have some integrity.

But what really surprised me here is only 44% of respondents regarded a page one Google ranking as important. I assumed everyone would rate that highly, not so and I don't totally disagree because the realities of Search Engine Optimisation can be quite difficult to pin down. What you ask your site to be optimised for can be a far cry from what potential customers enter in the search field, but that's another story.

Mobile compatibility, 78% said very important. Good job people, you're learning. It's not just very important, it's absolutely fundamental with over 50% of website visits today by phone users and if your website doesn't display properly, they'll promptly move on.

There is also the fact that Google ranks websites based on mobile compatibility first and relegates those non-compliant to the bottom of the list.

Website Investment? Oh dear. It never ceases to amaze me that people will pay forty bucks a week (over $2000.00 a year) for a stupid little ad in among dozens of others in the local paper, yet baulk at paying over a thousand for a full colour multimedia cross platform presentation that's on display 24/7 all year round.

Credit to those of you who said between one and three thousand, applause for those realists who acknowledge $3000 to $5000 is not unreasonable and to those that said $5000 to $10,000, you obviously have a comprehensive project in mind and I look forward to working with you. And for people who think under $500 is do-able, yes it is possible, your Hyundai Excel is waiting outside.

I also wanted to know how they preferred support delivery. You always get the people who like to call, that's okay and occasionally it works out faster, but mostly not, there's usually more to a problem than can be sorted over the phone.

Fortunately 66% of respondents listed email as their preferred option. We do run a ticketing system and this ran third to email and phone support, but the fact is you'll be placed in the queue behind whoever got there before you anyway. It's the only reasonable option and I'm not changing it. I did neglect to add Online Chat as an option, we do have it available but have never pushed its use.

The remaining four questions focused on business demographics and the results demonstrate a preponderance of genuine small businesses. I suppose it stands to reason that a small operation like ours serves lots of other small operators.

70% are sole operators or 2 person operations with only 12.5% employing 3 to 5 people, 10% with 6 to 10, 7.5% 11 to 20 and none employing more than 20 people.

Couple that with the turnover and years in business stats, there's my demographic, a glut of sole traders, predominately working out of a single physical location, 60% of whom have been in business for more than ten years. The only thing that varies widely is turnover, there's a range that's spread fairly evenly from $50K to $3M, with only one above that mark.

It's always difficult to know how much truth can be attributed to any of this, people's shame and ego get involved (same thing actually). Some people probably don't want to admit they only turned over less than $50,000 last year, or don't want to encourage the likes of me to charge them more than $500 for a site build.

The most bewildering information comes from the open ended question, "What would you like to do to improve your website?" I was really looking for a trend here in the hope I would get some insight to where people wanted to go in the future, I suppose thinking along the lines of more video or animated content.

Nup. Nothing of the sort. What people suggested was all quite reasonable, some wanting rebuilds, some wanting updated content, others wanting to add an ecommerce component, all sensible stuff, but I just got no direction from any of it. Ah well, ask a stupid question…

Finally, the general comments at the end were great, with three people actually telling me they are happy with what I do. That's more than I get at home.