



A Survival Guide for Aspiring Web Developers

By: Mike Morrison

Table of Contents

I. The Basics

II. Identify Your Digital Goals

1. What Your Prospective Customers Seeking?
2. What Else Do You Want Prospective Customers to Find?
3. Tips for Developing Exceptional Digital Goals.

III. The Name Game

1. The Necessity of Originality
2. Claiming Your Name (Registering)

IV. Build Your Site

1. Build a Template
2. Build Character
3. Build a First Impression

V. Deploy Your Site

VI. Manage Your Site

I. The Basics

Having browsed a great deal of web sites, you have most likely begun to develop ideas as to what you wish to convey and how you wish to do so. While you may believe that your perusals have given you sufficient direction with which to embark on your digital quest, it is important to clearly identify your site's objectives before you begin to slave away at the keyboard.

This section will outline the process that should be followed in order to minimize hassle, while greatly improving the quality of the finished product. Each of the following topics is coupled with a brief summary so that you may familiarize yourself with the concepts therein. This allows for a better understanding when they are covered in detail later in this document.

Identify Your Digital Goals

You must first develop a clear understanding of your thoughts by way of a tangible medium, such as a notepad or white board. What kind of content will be on your site? How will you arrange said content so that it easily understandable and aesthetically pleasing? How will visitors navigate through your site?

The Name Game

Web sites are accessed by way of personal addresses, or *domain names*. As potential visitors can be discouraged by unsuccessful attempts to reach your site, it is important that you chose a domain name that is easy to remember, spell, and say, much like an advertised telephone number. Because your ideal domain name may have been already claimed by someone else, availability must be a large concern in your decision process. Later in this document, you will learn how to determine what domain names are currently obtainable, as well as how to claim them.

Build

Whether you decide to utilize an independent web-design firm, or to tackle the technical processes yourself, you are responsible for clearly defining the areas of your site that relate directly to your business. This includes its functionality, how it visually represents your business, and the quality of its content.

Deploy

By this point, your web site is fully developed, but is only accessible by you and if applicable, your web-development company. In this section, you will learn how to move your site's files from there existing location on your computer to the domain name that you have chosen. In addition, you will learn of means by which to inexpensively accomplish the aforementioned transfer.

Manage

While your site is, at this stage, ready to be released upon the world, your involvement in its success is far from over. How will you make people aware of your site's existence? How will you ensure that your site continues to be as interesting as it was at its deployment? Without regular updates, your site's success will only be short-lived.

II. Identify Your Digital Goals

1. What Are Your Prospective Customers Looking For?

When a prospective customer visits your web site, what information are they seeking? What do they want to see before committing to a purchase?

- Information about your products and services as a whole.
- Additional information about individual products and services.
- Information about some of your existing customers
- Supplemental Product details such as options, models, ratings, and available features.
- Information pertaining to the types of applications your products and services are typically used for.
- A way for your prospects to easily and reliably contact a representative or your business. Lacking a good pathway of communication can create a feeling of detachment between you and your prospects; potentially symbolizing to some a general unconcern for your customers.

You should strive to place as much relevant information on your site as possible, while taking great care to arrange it in such a way that it is not overwhelming. Fine detail should be available, but not dominant.

2. What Else Do You Want Your Prospective Customers to Find?

While your potential customers are now well informed about your products and services, you have not really displayed any information that separates you from your competitors. What makes your business superior to others offering similar products and services?

- Comments from some of your customers: In addition to being a potential source of credibility, these can also help to shape your business' character. Potential customers will value the commentary of fellow consumers far more than that of yourself, as they are aware of your partiality.
- Awards: Aside from offering them another valuable, external opinion of your business, awards give potential customers a method to gauge your standing amongst others in your industry.
- Insights in to your company's methodology and internal processes: By letting them in on the way your business operates, you establish a level of trust with your prospects that will allow them to feel more comfortable with the concept purchasing from you.

- Any other information that could serve to convince your prospects of your abilities and competences.

3. Tips for Developing Exceptional Digital Goals

While in the process of developing your digital goals, keep the following tips in mind. Satisfying these questions will yield a much more tangible idea of what your web site should eventually be comprised of.

- Determine what you are trying to accomplish with your web site. What will be its primary function? A catalogue? A storefront? A gateway to leads and referrals?
- Develop a battle plan with which to organize your information into related sections. How many of such sections will you need? How will visitors navigate through these sections?
- Make sure that all of your information is relevant and helpful in the sales process. Does everything contribute, in some way, to the formation of strong customer loyalty and confidence in your business?
- Try to minimize links to other web sites, as they direct visitors away from your site. Are any such links necessary? Are they beneficial, either directly or indirectly, to your business?
- Make every possible effort to prevent visitors from having to go elsewhere for desired information. Is your site informative enough answer most any questions potential customers may have? Consider using a "Frequently Asked Questions" page to help accomplish this.
- Come up with a budget for your web site by comparing its operational costs with the amount of revenue you believe it will generate. In that mind set: What is the equation that offers the largest separation between investment and return?
- Look around the internet at thriving web sites within your own industry. How do they manage their content? What is their navigational structure like? Could ideas loosely based around theirs succeed if incorporated into your own site?

III. The Name Game

Now that you have a wonderfully detailed plan for your web site: What are you going to call it? Ideally, it would be the exact name of your business followed by “.com.” However, if your business’ name is fairly lengthy you may want to consider logical abbreviations.

1. The Necessity of Originality

Several years ago, when the internet was just beginning to grow in popularity, most domain names were readily available. Today, due the internet’s prominence in society, nearly every business has some sort of digital presence, and because domain name are extremely affordable, many businesses register, or claim, several domain names. This practice of registering multiple domain names has greatly contributed to there current unavailability. It is because of this scarcity that originality has become a necessity, as a well-planned and original domain name has the potential to be nearly as effective as those that are more ideal, and therefore more unobtainable.

2. What’s in a Name?

In order for your domain name to be effective, in that it helps, rather than hinders your prospects’ ability to easily reach your site, it must appeal to certain basic processes of the human brain.

Logic – Unless your business exists entirely online, prospects who are directly trying to reach *your* business will find your site through intuitive reasoning.

For example: Let’s say that your name is Roger The Shrubber. You arrange, design, and sell shrubbery through your company, Roger’s Shrubbery.

Arthur, who is in dire need of one of your wondrous shrubberies, might, through simple deductive reasoning, assume that your internet address is somewhere in the neighborhood of <http://www.rogersshrubbery.com>.

Unfortunately, when you had set out to register <http://www.rogersshrubbery.com>, it had already been taken by someone else. A little disheartened, but not defeated, you opted to purchase <http://www.goodwithscissors.com> to use for Roger’s Shrubbery’s internet address, a name which you quickly thought up while trying to cope with the shocking unavailability of your first choice. What you failed to realize in your haste is that <http://www.goodwithscissors.com> has virtually no *logical* ties to the actual name of your business.

Meanwhile Arthur, who has unsuccessfully attempted to reach Roger’s Shrubbery by trying nearly every possible configuration of <http://www.rogersshrubbery.com> , withdraws from his quest distraught, and without vegetation.

This situation could have been avoided if only you had thought to inquire as to the availability of such addresses as <http://www.rogers-shrubbery.com>, <http://www.rogersshrubbery.net>, or even <http://www.shrubbery.com>, all of which are perfectly *logical* alterations of <http://www.rogersshrubbery.com>.

Memory – The majority of your visitors will stumble onto your site while wading through a boundless sea of search engine results.

Example:

After hours of scouring the World Wide Web, Billy Bob arrives at your site. Upon doing so, he breaths a great sigh of relief: Because your site is so incredibly informative and well-planned, his tireless search for whatever it is that you sell has finally proved fruitful. In fact, he is so appreciative of your efforts and attention to your customer that he decides to purchase two of every item in your inventory.... tomorrow, when his lottery check clears.

Exhausted from his efforts, and calmed by the sense of resolution your site has brought to his evening, he shoots a brief glance at his internet browser's location bar, turns his computer off, and falls asleep. It is at this moment that it becomes extremely crucial that your visitors are able to easily recall your address:
http://www.whatevr-it-is_-`that-yu_cel.co.us.

Your address should be as simple as possible. While shorter names are usually easier to remember, length is not necessarily a large concern, as long as it incorporates common and correctly-spelled words, ideally arranged in such a way that they form a memorable phrase. Whenever possible, try to avoid using a lot of symbols such as tildes, hyphens, ampersands, or underscores. Also try to stay away from contractions. Basically, avoid anything that is difficult to speak aloud.

3. The Registration Binge

As mentioned above, the unavailability of domain names is partially due to people and businesses purchasing multiple names. However, it is not the intent of these parties to be subversive to the efforts of others. In claiming these multiple names, they are increasing the likelihood that someone will find their site through logical reasoning.

Think of it like this:

In his mind, your friend has chosen a number from one to twenty. If you guess this number, he will give you one hundred dollars, a new pony, or whatever: the actual prize is inconsequential. Initially, you are not given any guesses, but for a relatively miniscule fee per each, you can purchase up to nineteen guesses, thereby greatly increasing your odds of success.

Generally, you should acquire as many domain names as you can, and begin to do so as soon as possible.

IV. Build

As wonderful as you may think your web page looks, it is imperative that it appears equally as magnificent to your visitors. Every element of your site should adhere to the self-image you wish to convey. You must pay close attention to this, as every item you place on your site *will* affect your business' character in either a positive or negative manner, regardless of how trivial it may be.

1. Build a Template

Perhaps the most damaging aesthetic pitfall of web design is inconsistency, as it leads to confusion, and confusion prevents your visitors from accessing all of the wonderful information you have made available to them. An effective way to combat this is to design and implement a template, which is a type of interactive border that surrounds the content area (see below) and remains mostly congruent throughout your site.

Usually, a site's template is responsible for housing its navigation, which is the system of buttons, text, and images that, when clicked upon, send the user to different pages or sites. Your navigation system, above all else, *must* remain consistent throughout your site. For more in-depth information on template design as it relates to the Soholaunch Site Management Tool, you may download the Template Design Guide from the "Documents" section of the Soholaunch website (www.soholaunch.com).

2. Build Character

The content area is the area of your web page where the main body of section-specific text, pictures, calendars, etc. (content) is placed. This should be the only area of your site that changes from page to page. You should outline the layout of your content just as you did earlier when establishing your digital goals. Use this outline as a reference sheet when you begin to compile the content that is to be placed on your site. Each of your pages, as it relates to text formatting, should look exactly like your outline.

Below is a list of common visual blunders; learn them well. Once you have grasped a thorough understanding of the wrong path, the correct path should come naturally.

Clipart – Royalty-free clipart can be purchased in bulk for fairly inexpensive prices, but it nearly guarantees cheesiness.

For example:

Soholaunch, Inc. is an incredibly successful company, whose site receives over ten thousand hits per day. Take a look at <http://www.soholaunch.com>. Do you see any cartoon monkeys or other such pieces of illustrative miscellanea? Of course not.

Although it is possible to incorporate some clipart into your site without damaging its self-image, most clipart companies have license agreements that prevent you from altering their artwork: thus

severely hindering successful integration. Try using photographs instead, particularly those of a professionally-distributed, royalty-free nature.

Note: If you are intending to build a site for a company specializing in clipart sales, disregard the above information.

Giant Text – In addition to wasting space, ridiculously large text looks horribly tacky. While alternating font sizes within the smaller font ranges is perfectly fine, there are no situations that warrant the use of massive fonts within the content area. Consider using the following suggestions to facilitate your organizational mission:

- Red Text – Useful when stressing a **negative** context.
- Colored Text – Used in moderation, it can be an adequate transitional device.
- Bold Text – The weapon of choice for differentiating between sections of text (Ex: **“Giant Text”**).
- Italicized Text – Used *amidst* non-italicized text to represent emphasis.
- Underlined Text – Used with bold text to further differentiate between sections of text (Ex: **2. Build Character**)

When used apart from non-italicized text, italics represent supplemental information.

Crazy Colors – With the exception of headings and section markers, all of the text within your content area should be the same color. This should be a color that clearly stands out from your background color. Assuming that the background of your content area is located close to white in the visible color spectrum (if not, it probably should be), use a dark color such as black or navy blue for your text. There should be as much separation as possible between your background color and font color.

Clutter – Just as inconsistency can confuse and deter visitors, so too can overwhelming amounts of visual stimuli. Although you undoubtedly have heaps of information that you desperately want your visitors to see, you must realize that they do not want to see it until they ask for it by clicking on it. Don't shove it in their faces, as your site will come off as "pushy." Rather than trying to squeeze a great deal of information onto one page, distribute it over several pages.

If you've followed the instructions of this document thus far by omitting anything that may detract from your site's intended persona, you shouldn't have to worry about too much clutter.

Imposters – On the majority of web sites, text that links to other pages or sites appears underlined and blue in color. Because this is the most commonly used format for text links, avoid using the color blue in combination with an underline when dealing with text that is not "hot," or

clickable. Conversely, avoid straying far from this scheme when dealing with text that does link to something.

External Links – External Links are links that, when clicked, send the user to another web site. Avoid these whenever possible, as you want visitors to remain on your site as long as possible so that there is a better chance that they will see all the things that you want them to see. To illustrate on this point, I'll attempt to simulate a conversation between myself and our old friend Roger The Shrubber, who has placed an external link on his web site.

Mike: If you have deemed another party's web site worthy of mention and reference, you no doubt find that site to be exceptionally interesting, informative, and relevant to your business. Otherwise, the existence of such a link on your site would directly defy the ideals of this document.

Roger: Of course the site in question is exceptionally interesting, informative, and relevant to my business. I would never betray the teachings of this document.

Mike: I'm happy to here that you value my efforts to make you a better web developer. But tell me Roger: If your visitors click on that link, will they still be browsing *your* site and learning about the shrubbery that *you* arrange, design, and sell.

Roger: I suppose not. They'll be poking around the other site.

Mike: Exactly. They'll be perusing the other site, the one that you choose because it was exceptionally interesting, informative, and relevant to your business. And because they sought out your site, they were obviously interested in your business.

Roger: Right. Sure. Just get to the point.

Mike: Fair enough. If your business is what your site's visitors are currently interested in, then any site that is relevant to your business is also relevant to their immediate mental interests.

3. Build a First Impression

New Visitors – When a visitor accesses your web site for the first time, you have only your initial page, or home page, and one or two randomly selected clicks to persuade them to remain on your site. If you fail to do so during that time period, most users will lose interest and go elsewhere. Rather than lengthy and in-depth, the information displayed on your home page should be concise, yet significant.

The questions that you must answer are:

- Who's web site is this?
- What does [You're business' name] do / sell / specialize in?
- How do I contact [You're business' name]?

If you've followed this guide, then the sheer quality of your site and the information within should take over from there.

Frequent Visitors -- Placing current headlines and new web site-related information on your home page will generally satisfy your frequent visitors. They visit you site at least once a day. They know how to contact you, and they know how great your site is: that's why that visit it so often. There is only one question that these people want answered by your home page if they are to remain on your site for longer than the time it takes them to load up your site: What's new?

V. Deploy

Typically, moving all of your site's files from your computer to your domain name involves using one of the many FTP (File Transfer Protocol) programs available. Programs such as these are fairly simple to work with once they have been configured properly. In some cases, you will have to familiarize yourself with their existing directory structure so that you know where to place your files. If you are using the Soholaunch Site Management Tool, this process is even easier, as its sole purpose is to greatly simplify mundane and complex tasks, including file uploads.

VI. Manage

Now that your web site is up and running, it is up to you to make sure that it stays fresh. Initially, your site will receive a great deal of traffic, as all of the visitors will be first-timers. To these first visitors, everything on your site is brand new and interesting. Eventually, these visitors will become regular visitors, as they will undoubtedly be amazed by the excellence that your site exudes from every page. But as frequent visitors, they will grow weary of static information.

Once your site generates a solid base of regular visitors, it will be up to you to control the frequency of their visits. The more often that you add new material to your web site, the more often your regulars will visit your site. Most importantly, the more you update, the more users will think about your site. The more they think about your site, the more they will talk about your site to others who will naturally begin thinking about it, visiting it, becoming regulars, and so on.