FivePaths

Planning for a Website Project

10 essential elements

By Eric Leland & Jason Salter
FivePaths, LLC

Summary

Planning for a new website — or updates or existing to an existing one — needn't be overwhelming. Save headaches down the road by taking some time to consider your needs and resources upfront.

Whether you are building a website yourself, or hiring someone to build one for you, a good plan is essential. Fortunately, much of this work can be done without the help of a technology consultant. In fact, a major component of website planning includes defining non-technology elements such as goals, strategy, audience, and more. If you do find that you need outside help, a plan can help you identify how and where an expert opinion makes the most sense.

Elements of a Web Plan

Considering the following elements before you tackle a new website project can be invaluable in ensuring a successful outcome. Whether jotting down a few sentences or conducting a full-blown resources audit and guided discovery process, investing time in a web plan can lead to a more comprehensive final project.

✔ Executive Summary

Identify your organization's mission, as well as the the mission and goals of your new web site. Assess what kind of website you already have, including how it meets your current goals and where any gaps might be; ask how your new project might help to support these goals. Identify members of your planning team, and their roles in developing the project.

✔ Research and Evaluation

Research your sector for web projects of similar scope and intent. In particular, look for duplication of content and services to inform your planning. Ask questions related to their planning process and site implementation. Find good examples of sites with features you require, as well as sites you feel are less successful, detailing why.

✔ Target Audience

Who is your audience and how do they interface with your organization? How big is your audience? How do they use technology? What do they want from your organization? What will these audiences gain from your new website? List the various segments of your target audience and describe them.

✔ Content

Identify the content you will include on your site, and the related audience and strategy. Describe the content types you wish to include, noting whether these will be short text blurbs, multi-page documents, PDF files, PowerPoint files, videos, audio, and so on. Outline in brief what content will cover, and which audience segment(s) it is directed to.

✔ Structure

Using your general content list, identify content categories and outline a navigation structure for organizing that content. Ask how your audience will best locate this information when they come to the site, considering the perspective of visitors who are unfamiliar with your internal structure.

✔ Interactivity and Community Tools

How will audiences interact with staff, with one another, and with your content on your website? Will your audience be able to connect through the site? Can anyone contribute content? Specify which of your audience groups will have access to which interactive features, and how they will use or access them.

✔ Design

Seek out examples of websites whose designs appeal to you and those that don't. Use these to help establish your own color palette, images, logos, and visual themes that best reflect your mission. Ask what message your visuals should communicate about you. (Practical? Fun? Professional?) Remember to provide the highest quality image and logo files you can.

Be sure to consider how you plan to balance design and usability requirements, and where — and how much — you may need to compromise. (For example, where might you need to sacrifice design to ensure universal accessibility?)

✔ Measurements of Success

Identify what you hope to gain from this website, including benchmarks and how you plan to measure success. Reference organizational goals when defining success metrics, using straightforward language to describe them. (For example, We will increase our Facebook subscribers by 100 percent in the first year in order to increase our outreach.)

✔ Staffing and Training

Identify current IT and web staff. Describe their new roles (if any) and plan for new job descriptions and salaries. If necessary, plan to add new people to your team to fill the

gap. Who will update the site? How much time will they devote to this work a week? Identify staff training needs and plan accordingly.

✔ Budget and Timeline

Identify your current resources (financial, personnel, availiblity), along with your the timeline for project completion. Be sure to allow for project expansion in this budget, and know the maximum resources available.

Plan for Success

Even if you are not able to spend time on each element outlined here, any legwork you do up front will help your team make stronger decisions, help your web developer more quickly understand your goals, and result in a smoother and more cost-effective project.