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website planning

How to plan out your website

Planning is essential for a well structured, easy-to-use website. There is no point having an all-singing-all-dancing website if nobody can find the information that they need on it. The chances are that if you design your website without planning its structure, and without having a good idea about what you want it to do, you may have to start it all over again. Before you can start writing & planning your website you need to ask yourself what your website's purpose is. Start by getting your ideas down on paper.

What is my website for?

To answer this question write down a list of reasons that your site will exist. What are you setting it up for? What is the website's purpose? It might be a good idea to talk to someone else about it and get their ideas. Look at the examples I have come up with for 'Re-use It!'

Spend some time adding ideas to this list and you will

begin to have a good overall idea of the purpose of your website.

'Re-use It!' exists to:

- help the public reuse waste
- help businesses reuse waste
- save people money
- help the environment
- educate people
- stimulate debate
- stimulate action to help the environment
- share local resources
- get people to donate to our charity

To make it perfectly clear to yourself, using your list as reference, write down one sentence to describe exactly what your website is for.

Example

As an example in these tips, imagine a site called 'Re-use It!', a charity website that is being set up to give people original ideas on how to reuse waste items. The boxes in grey are the notes for this imaginary website.

Here is the statement I came up with from my list for 'Re-use It!':

'Re-use It!' gives out information on how to reuse waste.

Stick to this statement throughout your writing and designing. This may seem obvious now, but when dealing with such a complex structure as a website it is easy to become lost and self-absorbed. Your site exists to help other people, not to satisfy you!

Who is my website for?

Before writing content for your website you need to know who you are aiming it at. Think about the kind of person that might find your website useful. It might be a specific group of people, such as teenaged boys, or you might want to attract a broad section of society. Whoever your website is for, write down some types of people who would find your site interesting.

Always bare this list in mind when writing content for your website. Make sure that you are writing so that everyone on your list can understand. There is no use talking to a youngster using complicated language as they will not understand it, will become bored and may go away. At the same time it would not be a good idea to talk to a business owner in teenage slang!

'Re-use It!' would appeal to:

- Residents of UK
- Owners of businesses
- Owners of houses
- Office staff
- Youngsters
- Students

What is my website about?

Now that you know what your website is for and who it will appeal to you need to think about what your website is about. Instead of thinking about what you want to say on your website, think about it from the visitor's point of view.

Take your list of who your website is for and imagine a character from one

of the groups. Give them a quick background and scenario and imagine them visiting your site for the first time. Write down the specific questions that they ask. Remember, visitors usually come to your site with a vague idea of what they want, they will probably have a set of questions, not just one specific one.

Go over this exercise again and again until you get a long list of questions that someone might ask of your website. Use as many different characters and scenarios as you can. Get friends to help you with this. Ask someone that your website is aimed at. Get as many questions as possible.

For 'Reuse it!' I am going to imagine a business owner called Roger who has just set up a small business and visits my site to get some general advice on how he can help the environment. Here are the questions I think he will ask:

Roger the small business owner's list of questions:

- What can I do to help the environment?
- How can my business change to help the environment?
- Are there any other organisations that can help me?
- What can my staff do to help the environment?
- Will helping the environment save me money?



Here is a list of questions that I think a twelve year old called Alice asks when she finds 'Re-use It!' on the school computer:

Alice the twelve year old school-girl's questions:

- What can I reuse?
- Can I get my class to reuse things?
- Why should I reuse things?
- Is it fun?
- What do I get out of it?



When you have an exhaustive list of questions, take each question and change it into a statement that answers the question. For example, for our 'Re-use It!' website, change 'What can I do to help the environment?' into 'How to help the environment', change 'How can my business change to help the environment?' into 'Help for businesses' and change 'Are there any other organisations that can help me?' into 'Helpful organisations'. Try to make the answers as short and concise as possible. Write down these statements next to your questions. You should now have a long list of articles that your website could contain.

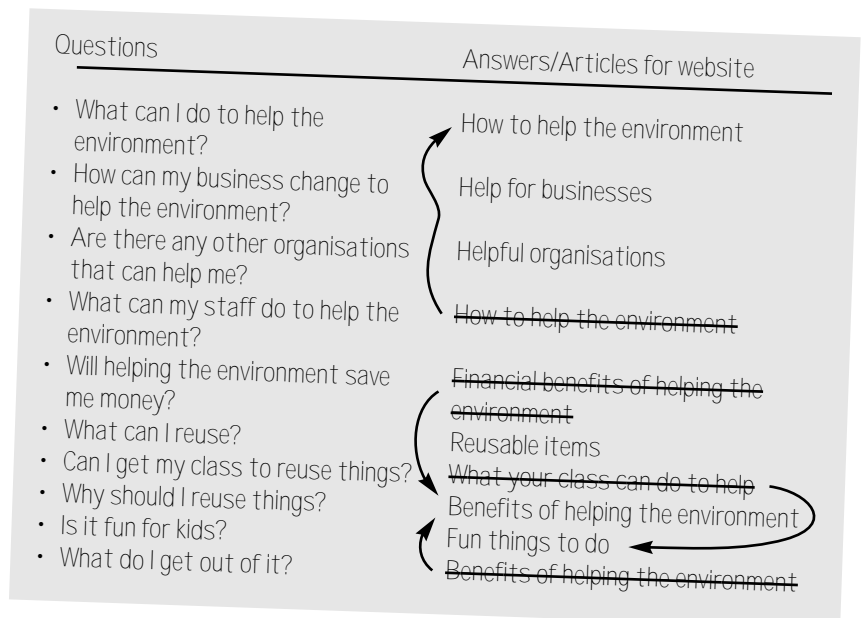
Your list is probably way too long so now you need to start slimming it down. Firstly, some of the answers may be repeated so cross an answer out when it occurs twice.

Some of the answers may be so similar that they can be combined as one. For

example, 'Financial benefits of helping the environment' could be quite easily the same as 'Benefits of helping the environment' so cross out the most specific, the least broad answer.

This exercise may seem a long-winded way of arriving at the answers, but it

focuses the articles on what your visitors want and not just on what you want to write about. Take your time on this list. Leave it lying around and add to it whenever you get another idea. The time you spend on it now will save a great deal of time when you have your site on computer.



Categorisation

Now that you have a concise list of what your site is about you need to categorise each piece of information. The aim of doing this is to be able to put all the information that might go on to your site, now or in the future, under a heading that will make sense so that your visitor will be able to find it.

There are two ways of doing this which can be combined. One is to categorise the *type of person* that will visit your site, the other is to categorise the *type of information* that they are searching for.

For example, I could categorise my list of answers under the type of visitor that would find the information useful:

Category:	Piece of information
• School children	Fun things to do
• Business owners	Help for businesses Helpful organisations Financial benefits of helping the environment

or I could categorise each article under information type headings, for example:

Category:	Piece of information
• Environment	How to help the environment Benefits of helping the environment
• Reuse	Reusable items Fun things to do

or I could use a combination of both:

Category:	Piece of information
• Environment	How to help the environment Benefits of helping the environment
• Business	Help for businesses Helpful organisations Financial benefits of helping the environment
• Kids	Fun things to do

Play around and see what pieces of information you can fit under what categories. You need to finish up with a list of about 5-10 categories with all your information categorised.

You could write each piece of information down on a piece of paper so that you can move them around and try them under different categories.

Once you have your final categories you may want to add more pieces of information under the headings. For example you may realise that if you are having a 'Kids' section that you could put 'Information for parents' under it.

Take your time. This is probably the most important exercise that you can do when thinking about your website and it is essential to any web designer to have these categories in place before work takes place on the site.

www. help

Here are some websites you might find helpful:

<http://www.jessett.com/>

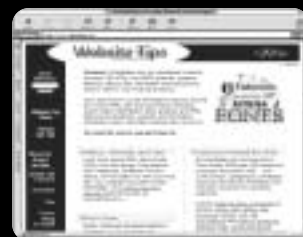
A very friendly guide to everything you need to know about all aspects of web design.



<http://www.sun.com/980713/webwriting/>

Article that goes into depth about why writing for the web is different to writing for print.

<http://www.websitetips.com/>
A comprehensive collection of



links to articles about web design. A good section on writing web content too.

<http://www.coolhomepages.com/>

The best web design from around the world. A great site for getting inspiration from.



Your categories need to be quite broad so that any piece of information you may want to add to your site in the future could be placed under one of your headings. You may find that headings such as 'Information' are too broad for your visitors as they will not know what kind of information they need. Remember the list of people you are appealing to when you are compiling these categories. If you are aiming the site at young people, for example, remember to use fun, catchy words to categorise your information under.

Subcategorisation

You should now have a list of pieces of information that visitors would find useful on your site so you can start writing content for your website. Some pieces of information may be too broad to write about in the space of one page and may need subcategorising. In the list for 'Re-use It!', the piece of information that we have come up with under the 'Kids' section, called 'Fun things to do', may need more than one article writing for it. Under the 'Fun things to do' subcategory you could have a recycling quiz, a cartoon page, an

activity page and an art competition.

Go through each of the pieces of information you have come up with and think if it needs dividing into further articles. You don't have to add articles if you are happy with the list you already have, but it may be worth brainstorming to see what ideas you come up with.

You now have your complete web structure organised which should look something like this:

Menu:	Submenu:	Articles:
• Environment	How to help the environment	Recycling Re-using Repairing Top-ten tips
• Business	Benefits of helping the environment Help for businesses	Success stories Top-ten benefits Grant awarding bodies What your business can do NOW!
• Kids	Helpful organisations Financial benefits of helping the environment Fun things to do	Recycling quiz Cartoons Activities Competition
• Links		
• Contact		

After going through these exercises you should now have a much better idea of what your website is for, who it is for and what it is about. When it comes to designing your website on the computer you already know how it should be structured so you can design it quickly and easily. If you pass the work on to a web-designer it will save them time and therefore save you money. But most importantly you can be proud and confident that you have a well structured website that visitors will find easy and pleasurable to use.

Further reading

- *"A simple guide to writing for your website"* Susannah Ross. Prentice Hall.
- *"Website Planner: A Practical Guide to Planning Your Web Presence"* Ben Mitchell. Longman.

Beg, borrow & steal

When planning out your website, don't be afraid to borrow ideas from other websites. The web has a language that is understood by people who use the web. If you deviate from this language the chances are you will be misunderstood. You will find that websites use categories like 'About us' and 'FAQ'. If you find that another website's way of categorising information works, then just borrow it!

Here are a couple of sites that are similar to the aims of 'Re-use It!':

<http://www.wastewatch.org.uk/>

This site divides its subjects into types of people



and information under headings similar to 'Re-use It!'. However a few of the menu items, like 'Education' or 'Communication' may be useful for 'Re-use It!' too.

<http://www.recyclingglass.co.uk/>

A nice colourful site aimed specifically at kids. Note the informal kids language used in this site's sections:

'Funky facts', 'Join Bottle Busters' and 'Fun House'.



A 'Recycling Club' might be a good idea for 'Re-use It!'.