



Web Design Cheatsheet

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Building a web site requires some planning to keep from getting lost. In other words, you need to understand where you're going and how to get there.

No, seriously.

Have you ever popped awake, right in the middle of a supermarket and stood there, wondering just what in the heck you were up to? Me neither. It doesn't happen.

No one goes into a supermarket with no idea and just wanders around until they "get inspired". Exactly everyone makes a list, and it's almost always in writing.

Your web site deserves at least as much effort, and it may cost as much as a year's worth of groceries. Unless you aren't serious and just plan on wandering around until you "get inspired". In that case the cost and confusion of thrashing around could be something to write home about.

So, in a nutshell:

Define your goal: *A brief statement of purpose.*

Create your plan of attack: *Decide how to make it happen.*

Sketch your site: *Lay it out freehand.*

Color it in: *Add graphic design, typefaces, images, documents, text.*

Publish your site: *Write the code and get it out there.*

Keep it fresh: *Manage changes and maintain that minty freshness.*

Here's how:

1. *Define your goal.*

Come up with a short statement to show the way. The big time computer people call it a *vision statement*. Call it whatever you want, but this is the single most important item on your list, so pay attention.

Shoot for 10 to 15 words at most, or fewer if you can manage it. Here's the key idea: **WHAT ARE YOU DOING?** Think about it.

Get something as short and memorable as you can. Something that stays with you for life on the first hearing.

Like the motto of the Ritz-Carlton hotel: "We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen." Beat that or die trying.

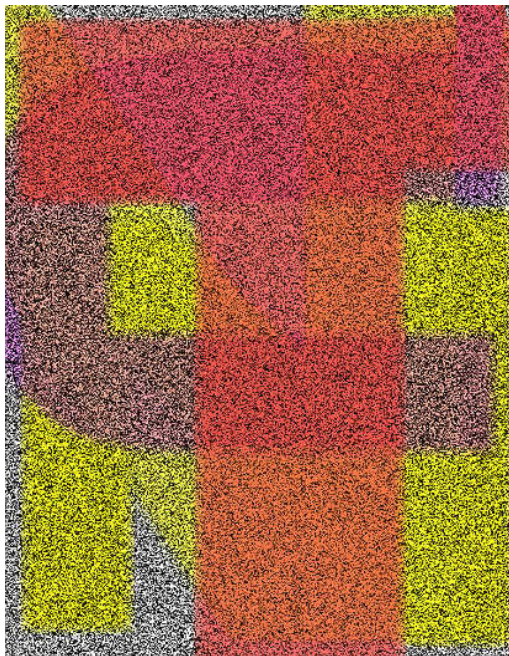
RESULT FROM STEP 1:

A short statement of purpose for the site.

2. Create a plan of attack.

Here's a scary term: *information architecture*. Chew on it for awhile. It isn't as bad as it sounds. What it means is just some more thinking, not about who you are and what you want to accomplish, but about how.

Decide what you are going to say and in what order. Are you selling a product or a service? Is your site about sharing information? Does your company do lots of things or just one?



In other words, the information architecture is a plan to get you to our goal. You decide what to present, in what order, and in how much detail.

Rough out some scenarios about how people will use the site. What people should remember, whether you're selling a product, or a service, or just providing information.

Think strategically at this stage. What will make the site usable, convenient, and to the point?

RESULT FROM STEP 2:

Two documents --

A page description diagram listing relevant information, with the most important items at the top, *and*

A rough draft of each page's content.

3. Sketch the site.

You've got your big ideas laid out. Now we get to the details.

If information architecture was the wholesale level, this is the retail level. Make some simple diagrams using good old pencil and paper. These are called *wireframes*.

Why pencil and paper? In the computer age? Well, they're cheap and simple. You can start playing with ideas, and whenever you hit a dead end you get to crumple it up and just throw it away. Satisfying and easy. And very cheap. Remember that.

And what the heck is a wireframe? Well, that just means that it's a sketch. An outline. The forest and the trees kind of thing. Sketch the forest's outline now and add trees in the next step.

OK, back to the paper. Block off a sheet of paper into three vertical columns and three horizontal rows. This will give you a nice grid to hang ideas on, and keep you lined up with "the rule of thirds", a tried and true design standard.

Draw some simple diagrams, starting with the main idea of what you're up to. This will be the home page. Decide what comes next and where it ought to go. Keep your goal in mind. You can sketch inside one block, or span two or three, either vertically or horizontally, and keep things pretty well lined up this way.

After getting two or three of these knocked out, you'll have a rough idea of how the most important pages of your site might look. Crude but adequate. Perfectly adequate.

Then decide how they will all relate. Bingo. Now you have a site map too.

RESULT FROM STEP 3:

Wireframe sketches and a site map.

4. Color it in.

Decide on a single color, maybe two. A company logo is a good place to look, or an existing business card.

Color adds emotion. Picking a main color will give the site its main emotion. Blue is cool, calm and collected, and steps back. Red is excited and hot, and leaps at you. You get the idea.

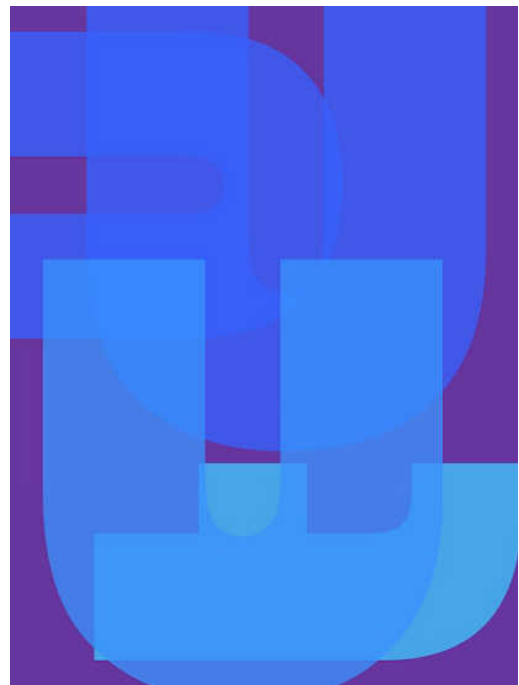
What kind of type faces to use? Hmm. Kind of the same idea as color. Each kind of type has its own feeling. Continue working in broad, general brush strokes. Pick a typeface for the banner and main headings.

Are you going to have advertising links? Is this a community site? Sales? Whatever the purpose, continue refining your ideas.

Will there be a collaboration between pages or a more hierarchical, vertical arrangement, for drilling down into the site? Whatever seems right. Refer to your site map, wireframes, the page description diagram and content documents.

Toward the end you get detailed.

Write final copy, choose and buy images, decide which links go where. Plan on embedding audio or video files, or having downloadable documents. Choose which specific products will be displayed and how the shopping cart will work, if that's what you'll be needing.



RESULT FROM STEP 4:

Several things --

- ① **A final design.** This details everything about each page. All the resources, such as written copy, images, color schemes, navigation map, and anything else needed.
- ② **A detailed test plan** specifying what happens whenever someone clicks any link or button, or navigates to or from each page.

5. Publish.

By now you've chosen and registered a domain name. You've picked a hosting company based on cost, reputation, and support for the software platform you need.

Build HTML pages, add stylesheets, databases if needed, and do good, old-fashioned programming. Bolt in all the other files: documents, photos, graphics, audio and video files. All that. For real this time.

Testing. Do this as the site gets built. Again and again. Over and over. This means management, staff, and selected customers working together. To ensure that the site operates as planned while you're building it. No waiting for ugly, expensive surprises at the very end when it's really, really hard to change things.

Only rank beginners think they can get everything exactly right up front, before they have all the information. Professionals plan ahead, but also adapt as they go, because that's the way it works. Test here, tweak there, little by little. Roll over little problems one by one. Avoid big disasters.

Once the site is done, and approved, it goes live.

RESULT FROM STEP 5:

A completed web site



6. Keep it fresh.

You'll need updates, so plan for them. It's called *content management*.

Sometimes this is a separate software package, sometimes it's a custom-built system, and sometimes it's just trained staff.

Business changes, conditions change, and sites do too. You'll be ready to cope. And you'll have as much support as you want from us.

Q & A

Q: **Some places offer free web sites.** How about that? Can't I just whip up my own site for free?

A: Try doing your own haircuts. If you're satisfied with the results, you'll be happy building and maintaining your own web site. No matter how it looks. No matter how much of your time it takes. Your call. Enjoy.

Q: **Can't I just tell you what I want** and have you build it? Why do I have to get involved in planning? And testing? Are you serious about that? I have work to do.

A: Sure. Can do. You pay up front and sign a contract when you drop off your instructions. Then I'll notify you when the site is done, and you take what you get.

Starting to sound a little iffy? Think about the last time someone tried to read your mind. How did that work out for you?

Do you run the rest of your business by having someone else do lots of guessing? Do you care enough to be involved or not? Once more, your call.

Q: **OK, but I am busy.** How about if I give you some ideas, and you drop off a few designs, then I'll pick one I like and you just do it?

A: Kind of the same as the previous question. Sorry, but no, that would hurt us both.



It would take time away from paying clients on this end, which isn't ethical. Hurts me, hurts them. And you really need to have someone on your side, working hand in hand, to make sure your business is properly understood. That it gets the attention it deserves.

You do deserve the best, and if for some reason none of the "few designs" seems to be a good fit, the time and effort spent is still gone. Forever. So if you don't quite care about your own business that much, then maybe you'd be happier somewhere else. I do care about my business, and my ethics, so I have to decline.

Q: **I honestly have lots of other things** to think about. Do I really need all this fancy programming stuff? What if I just put up a copy of my brochure with a phone number?

A: Might work. But the web is dynamic, interactive. It's more than a wall to hang a poster on. But it requires some special skills too. You don't need a dumb web page somewhere.

You don't need to know programming, but you need someone who does. Like digging around inside your TV set, it's harder than it looks at first.

For basic text and color, you'll need markup and style sheets. Those are the easy parts. Then think about design, maybe graphic art. Photographs or other images. Do you know Photoshop?

Maybe the above is enough, maybe not. Maybe you also need database development. Think about intra-site searching, a blog, email, content management, archiving, site hosting, version control, scripting, link checking, validation, accessibility testing, search engine visibility, ongoing support.

You already have a business to run, right? Have someone who knows the ropes on your team. But if you're up to it on your own, go ahead then. The 19th century was the big era for posters. Just keep in mind that we left it behind a while back.

Q: **Bottom line, my neighbor's kid can do this,** and he's dirt cheap. Why don't I just have him do it?

A: Does he do your tax accounting, provide legal services, or your medical care? Remember, this is your business, not a high school project. You call him "kid" for a reason. Rather deal with a pro?

Q: **So you're hinting that you're not cheap?** You're going to try charging an arm and a leg, aren't you? So just how much will this really cost?

A: Like most things, it depends. And that is an honest answer.

Have you planned on buying a domain name? Have you figured in ongoing hosting costs? Do you have someone to maintain and back up your site? And you'll need professionally-written copy. You'll need to find images and pay royalties on them. Have you planned for that?

The basics, from me, are design and development. Designers and developers have totally different skill sets, and usually they're two different people. You can go that way too. Do you prefer to pay by the hour, on an open-ended basis, or pay by the job? Both have pros and cons, and you can get it either way. You can also start small and add on later.

How much this costs really depends on what you need done, when you need it, and how well you want it done, just like everything else. It's best to find someone you can trust and then work with them. You know they won't nickel and dime you to death once you take the bait.

Not everything that's cheap is bad, but you probably want what's right, and not whatever is cheapest, don't you?



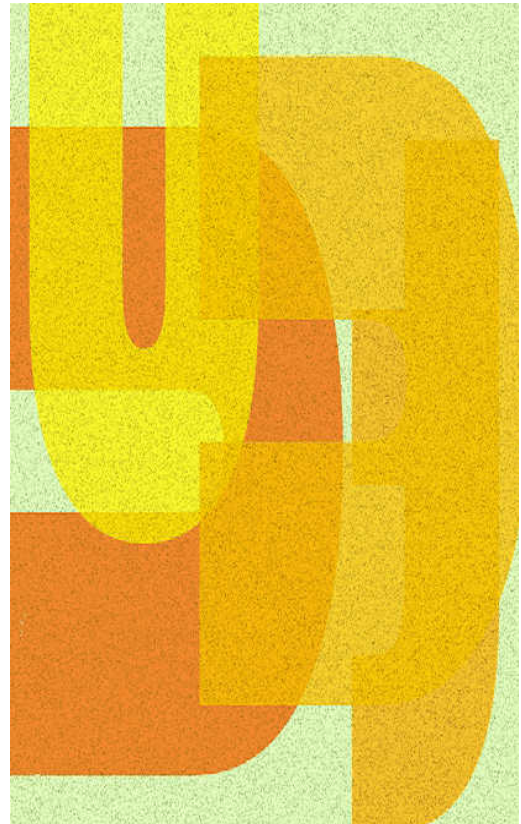
So, once again,

how do you get a web site built?

By taking the cookie cutter approach and working through a chop shop, or with a hobbyist? Well, is your business just like every other one out there? Does it fit into a mold designed for someone else? Is it a hobby? If so, you don't need a professional-quality web site. Why bother?

But if you *really* are in business, for *real*, then keep these ideas in mind:

- ❶ **Focus:** Keep your goals and customers in mind at all times.
- ❷ **Trust:** Work with a designer and developer you feel good about.
- ❸ **Identify:** Pay attention to your brand and mission.
 - ❹ **Architect:** Create a strategy.
 - ❺ **Design:** Plan graphics, layout, and interactive features.
- ❻ **Humanize:** Keep a human touch through usability, accessibility, friendliness.
- ❼ **Build:** Add content, do programming, make it dance.
- ❽ **Check:** Do formal testing, sanity checks, trial runs.
 - ❾ **Deploy:** Give it life by going live.
- ❿ **Freshen:** Refresh content, post news, maintain that exciting sparkle that keeps people coming back for more.



And then, *What about the future?*

Things change. All the time. You know that. That's why you're still in business. You keep in touch.

You adapt your strategy, your products and services to changing times and changing customer needs. That's how it goes.

Some day you'll need to change your website too. Add a whole section, or add a piece onto something that's there already. Change the colors. Add a slideshow. Rebuild a shopping cart.

Something.

You'll want to be working with someone who can help. Someone in favor of simplicity and efficiency. Someone who won't let you down.

I can build your new site, or rebuild an old one, test it, and pass it back to you. As often as needed, until it's exactly right.

You want things to work just as planned, make sure you get exactly what you agreed to.

Important for you, important for me.

I supply complete training and documentation.

You get the ability to make everyday updates, and I will provide ongoing support for those changes that aren't quite the everyday kind.

I hope your business grows. A lot. I hope things change. For the better. And change they will. When your business needs change, I can enhance your site.

When your business grows I can grow your web site with it. No problem at all. Flexibility will be built right in.

Resources: Here are some interesting places for you to learn more...

Web Design from Scratch: "A complete guide to designing web sites that work."

➔ www.webdesignfromscratch.com/

Digital Web Magazine: "An online magazine intended for professional web designers, web developers and information architects." ➔ www.digital-web.com/

Creating Passionate Users: Kathy Sierra's now-defunct but still priceless blog. How to make people crazy about your business. ➔ headrush.typepad.com/

Design Melt Down: "Design elements, trends and problems in web design."

➔ www.designmeltdown.com/

