

Is Your Website Working *FOR* you or *AGAINST* you?

by Gary A. Campbell, gacWebSolutions

I love studying other peoples' websites. I study over one hundred sites every week. Unfortunately I've concluded that most business websites are working against, rather than for, their owners.

For example, recently I was trying to help a relative who is planning a trip overseas. He needed to buy a power converter. I searched eight sites and not one of those sites presented what I would consider a professional impression. These site owners appear to be more interested in busy backgrounds and flashing images than they are in making it easy and pleasant for customers to find the information they need and place an order. Unnecessary animations and annoying graphics do not make sales.

I used to be in the printing business. We used to impress on customers that their business card is often their only chance to make a first impression. But honestly, that's not 100% true. When you hand someone your business card you're most likely standing in front of them. Even if your card fails to impress, you can salvage the situation by being impressive yourself.

Like a business card, your website is a direct reflection of you and your business. Unlike a business card, if your website fails to impress you won't get a second chance. Your prospect can leave you in the dust with a keystroke and you'll never see him again. If your site doesn't look professional, the perceived value of your products will suffer.

OK, so let's say your website presents a strong impression of your company and your products. It may still fail to deliver because it takes too long to load. You'd be amazed at how short the average person's attention span is. If your prospects bail out before your site is fully loaded, not only is your website failing to deliver sales, it's actually spreading a poor impression of your company and its products.

Let's take this to the next step. Let's say your website presents your company in a positive light and loads like lightening. Now we have to focus on your site's content so that visitors will spend some time at your site. Quality content is more than just a page full of links. In addition to presenting your product line and prices, give visitors useful information. For example, if I were designing a site for a company that sells power conversion products I would include a page of FAQs (frequently asked questions). I would have a list of definitions that would explain the difference between an adapter, a converter and a transformer. I would explain the difference between voltage and cycles and include a chart of countries and their voltage standards. If you want your visitors to stay at your site, you must provide the content they need in an organized fashion.

Once you've got your content issues resolved, you'll want to update it regularly. Don't let your content become stale. By revising the content, you'll be giving visitors a reason to return to your site in the future.

Describing all the pitfalls to be avoided in designing your website would take an entire book. Here is a short list of what I look out for so that the websites I design are working for, rather than against, their owners:

General Issues

- Errors in spelling or grammar
- Browser incompatibility
- Load time
- Lack of Meta tags
- Poorly chosen keywords
- Incomplete pages or 'Under Construction' signs

Content Issues

- Content not geared to target audience
- Hard to find contact information (or none at all)
- Static content

Usability Issues

- Lack of a consistent look & feel
- Counter-intuitive navigation
- Broken links
- Multiple buttons with same purpose
- Inconsistent use or look of buttons
- Lack of a 'You Are Here' feature
- Overuse or underuse of tables

Distractions

- A "Welcome to Our Site" page
- Too many or too few graphics
- Huge, unbroken blocks of text
- Unnecessary use of animated graphics
- Backgrounds that distract
- Too many banners and buttons
- Too many colors
- Too many different fonts

The key to objectively evaluating your site lies in empathizing with your target audience. Are you able to visit your site from your audience's perspective? You're probably too close to it to be objective. I recommend you ask other people to visit your site and provide feedback. Choose people who resemble your target audience and ask them to use their own displays and browsers to navigate your site. You'll be surprised at what they find and their observations will help you design a website that is truly working FOR you.