

Tips on Developing a Site Outline and Content for Your Web Site

The following tips will help you be more successful in creating the content and navigation for your site. Plus it will help the page production process go smoothly.

STEP 1 – Define the target

You have likely already defined your target audience(s) in your business and/or marketing plans or you may already have marketing materials geared toward specific groups. It is critically important to consider how a member of each target audience will navigate your site to find the information that will be most important for them.

If you have divergent target customers (e.g. non-profits, corporations and associations), will it make sense to send all of them to a “Services” section that either has content divided by target customer groupings, or is more generic in its approach? Or consider if it would be more powerful to have a section or even a separate site devoted to each of the major target audiences.

If your business is new and you haven’t clearly defined target audiences, they may be changing too much to be reflected within the site navigation. Some businesses have actually developed separate sites for each audience (knowing that content would be redundant on many pages). The key is to make the customer feel like your site was created a) just for them and b) solves the problem they are seeking help for. In other words, the more targeted the content is toward each customer’s “pain,” the more likely you are to get their business.

STEP 2 - Develop the site outline (also called navigation)

This may be something you create in tandem with your designer or on your own.

- **Where to start** — First examine your favorite sites as well as those of your competitors to see how they break up their content and how they named the primary areas of their site. At minimum, you should always have a page that contains contact information as well as an “About Us” page or section where things like bios, company background information and any other credibility-building content. Contact information can be included in the About Us (or another name of your choosing) section if you’re having a hard time with the next item.
- **Number of sections** — Ideally, you should have seven or less primary (also known as top-level) sections on your site’s navigation. Studies have shown that users become overwhelmed with choices if you have too many sections. “Home” (stands for home page) as well as the sections mentioned above should be included on this list.
- **Section names** — Now that you have at least two sections defined, you should consider what the other sections should be on the site and how you want to name them. Ideally, section names will go together well (have the same tone) and will be very plain in their description. Fancy or cute names that don’t clearly communicate what’s inside the section might make sense to you, but if they don’t make sense to the end user, you’re sunk. Think back to the target audience question above and consider how you will be directing each target audience toward their content. You also want to keep your section names as short as possible. If they will be listed across the top navigation you want them to be shorter, not longer, so there is room for all of them and/or room to add if you find a need later. If they are listed in the left navigation, it’s nice if all of them are short names so that they will be one line versus two lines long.

STEP 3 – Write your copy, and keep it interesting:

Web usability studies show that people don’t want to read online – they prefer to scan information and click. So in writing copy for your site, you should seek to keep as much as possible “above the fold” (meaning don’t make the users scroll down to read a page) and keep copy short.

STEP 3 – Continued:

1. **On the home page especially, keep it short.** Site visitors should know within 10 seconds after the page loads what your business is, what they can do on your site (gather info, buy things, etc.), and what problem(s) you are trying to solve for them. Don't force the user to scroll down to see critical information because they won't likely do that.
2. **For longer pages, add a list of subheads** at the top of the page that are links to the corresponding content lower in the page. This way, users can see what is on the page and click quickly to the information they need.
3. **Keep it short and to-the-point**, use bullets instead of paragraphs, or divide the copy into digestible chunks.
4. **Use graphics** such as charts, diagrams, photos or illustrations that strongly compliment the look of your site in place of content where possible.
5. **If the goal of your site is to compel the reader to some type of action, ask the reader to take action on every page.** For example, If the main goal of your site is to create online buyers, you should be asking them to buy on every page.
6. **Use keywords in your headlines and subheads.** Keywords are the words and phrases that people would use to find your site if they were looking for it in a search engine like Yahoo! or Google. Using these key terms within your headlines helps improve your search engine ranking for these terms. Using keywords in your body copy helps improve your keyword density, which can also improve your ranking. But it should not be done in an overt way that impedes readability.

STEP 4 – Know when it is appropriate to have longer pages:

- If the page contains technical documentation or detailed reference information, it probably isn't the kind of thing someone would be reading online for fun. So in that case, having a longer page is appropriate, especially if the information on the page makes more sense together than broken down into multiple pages. But in that case, consider applying #2 above.
- If the copy is something that people will likely print out to read, having multiple pages can be burdensome.

STEP 5 - Prepare your copy for production

Once the HTML page template for your site has been created and you have approved it, content is needed to complete your site. The following tips will help speed the production of your site:

- Ideally, copy should come in **Microsoft Word** or Rich Text Format (RTF) files. To reduce edit cycles, have everyone who needs to review the copy approve it before it is sent for production.
- If you have a **"highlights" or second column area** for things like testimonial quotes on your site, indicate what content should appear in that column on every page. Not all pages have to have content in these columns.
- If an **image(s), chart**, etc. should appear on a page, please indicate that at the top or bottom of the page that should contain the image(s). Reference either the file names of the images or give a description of it.
- **Links** should be indicated by underlining the item that should be linked and indicating the URL or page that the link should go to in parenthesis after the link:
 - How to indicate internal links within your site**- The product bulletin (link to products page) is a useful resource for xyz...
 - How to indicate links outside your site** - The parent company newsletter (link to <http://www.parentcompany.com/prod.html>) is a useful resource for xyz...

If your site is a redesign project...

- If you need to send copy for an existing web form, simply fax or mail in a marked up copy of that form with the corrections needed, if any.
- If you have some pages that are changing and other pages that remain the same, please indicate in your Word files the pages that remain the same rather than recreating all the type in the Word document.

STEP 6 - Name your files

- **If your site is more than 5-10 pages**, a separate Word file for each section of the site is preferred. The file should be named what the section will be named according to your site map. For example, products.doc would contain all the content for the Products section. Secondary pages within each section should be clearly indicated with page breaks, subheads or both so that production knows where to start new pages.
- **If your site is more than 30 pages**, it may be advisable to create a separate file for each page and label the files to indicate their hierarchy status. For example, the top level "Products" page would be products.doc while Widgets, a page within the Products section would be products-widgets.doc.