10 Steps to Creating the Perfect Web Site

by

Charles B. Kreitzberg, Ph.D.
CEO, Cognetics Corporation

Creating or updating a web site can be a difficult task. At Cognetics Corporation, we have found that following the ten steps outlined here can help ensure a smooth process and productive outcome. In many cases, we have LUCID Templates™ available to guide the steps and deliverables below and we are happy to share them if requested.

1. **Create An Executive Steering Committee**

   The steering committee should consist of the key executives who have stakeholder interest in the web site. This usually includes, at a minimum: marketing, sales, information technology and product management.

   - Align the steering committee around a common vision and priorities.
   - Explicate the business objectives of the web site.
   - Establish a reasonable budget and timeline.
   - Identify and make explicit key issues and sensitivities. Resolve them or develop a process for decision making so that the web team does not have conflicting priorities.

2. **Establish The Web Team**

   The web team is a cross-functional team that typically includes: individuals representing marketing, sales and products; technical representation including a webmaster and development staff; a branding specialist or graphic artist; a writer; and of course a usability specialist. It may include both internal staff and vendors.

   - Make certain that the team has understood the vision of the executive steering committee and is operating with a single agenda.
   - Agree on processes for decision-making, conflict resolution and communication. Establish clear roles and responsibilities.
   - If there are vendors on the team, make certain that all vendors understand their roles and are committed to cooperation.
   - Agree on schedule, processes to be followed, deliverables and management reviews.

- Assess risks and determine how they will be managed throughout the project
- Identify technical constraints and issues. Schedule proof of concept studies if they are needed to validate specific tools and technologies.
- Determine if a content management tool will be employed and what effect this will have on the project.

3. **Conduct Reviews and Sketch Concepts**

As a first step identify existing material that should be reviewed as part of the project. This can include business plans, competitive sites, the current web site, customer suggestions and market research studies.

Develop lists of:

- Business objectives for the current site. How will the company get the desired return on its investment (e.g. increase market share, improve customer loyalty, create more market presence, improve customer service, increase sales, improve competitive position).
- Elements in the current site that are working and should be kept or expanded.
- Elements in the current site that are not working and should be revised or eliminated.
- Elements in competitive sites that should be considered or responded to in the current design.
- Suggestions and comments from the field (users, sales, distributors).

With these lists in hand, begin sketching some design concepts for discussion. These are not commitments nor should they be highly refined. The idea is to begin brainstorming and creating some visual representations to share with others for comment. Do not focus on look and feel here – pencil sketches are fine.

4. **Identify User Segments and Perform Discovery**

Discovery means studying the users who will be visiting the site and understanding their interests, skills, motivations, limitations and what tasks they are performing.

- Determine who will be using the website, what their characteristics are and what tasks they will be performing.
- Create personas for each major user segment.
- Wherever possible, interview users to get their input. Use the concept sketches developed in step 3 as discussion starters.

- Determine the user experiences you want the site visitors to have.
- Identify reasons for users to make return visits.
- Create scenarios for the various user segments and share them with stakeholders for review and verification.

5. **Create Separate Branding / Look and Feel**

   The process of developing new branding and a look and feel for the site is best accomplished as a task separate from the site design. The reason is that many stakeholders and reviewers will be unable to separate their ideas about content from their ideas about look and feel. The end result is that the project can get mired down in long discussions about issues of presentation and wording. By separating the look and feel from the content, it becomes possible to achieve closure on these critical issues much ore rapidly. Then when content and presentation issues arise, they will be in the context of an approved and agreed-upon, look and feel and will be easier to resolve.

   - Conduct this step in parallel to step 6. Use the basic navigational structure developed in step six for the sample screens.
   - Develop several branding approaches.
   - Create bitmaps to show them.
   - Use neutral text or “greeking” to avoid sensitivities around wording and presentation (for example, a stakeholder who feels that his or her product should be given more prominence).

6. **Develop a Navigational Model**

   - Use wireframes to develop a navigational and information architecture model. This also helps separate navigation, content and presentation from branding and look and feel.
   - Do not assume that there is only one correct design. There may be several navigational designs that will work equally well.
   - Consider 508 requirements (access for the disabled) in the design. If you perform government work, this may turn out to be an issue and it is always good customer relations.
   - Perform usability tests on paper prototypes to identify design issues and correct them.

7. **Develop a Key Screen Prototype**

   - Combine the navigational model developed in step 6 and the branding/look and feel developed in step five to create a key screen prototype.
   - Use bitmaps to represent key screens with the actual look and feel and content.

- Perform usability testing with the key screen prototype to determine if there are any design problems that need to be fixed.
- Develop a style guide that specifies the look and feel, branding, navigation and information architecture so that all additional screens can be created.
- Develop complete content specifications.

8. **Build Site**

   Following steps 1-7 you will have complete specifications in hand, a design that has been approved by all stakeholders, and a design that has been verified as usable by testing. Now you are ready to create "production code."

   Make certain that the development team has a well-thought-out development methodology and is maintaining appropriate communication about progress and issues that arise.

   Perform late stage redesign if needed to support the development process. If you have followed these steps carefully, little or no late stage design changes should be needed.

9. **Populate and Test**

   - With the web site coding complete, populate it with all desired content.
   - Proofread.
   - Test all links and functions.
   - Check all e-commerce functions including shopping carts and credit card processing.
   - Review all reports.
   - Have internal staff including the executive steering committee try out the site before release to make certain that there are no showstoppers.

10. **Release**

    You are there! Enjoy your success. Gather as much data as possible about customer reaction and usage so that you can refine the site. Publish and enforce standards to maintaining the content current and integrating in new products and product lines.

Cognetics Corporation ■ 51 Everett Drive ■ Po Box 386 ■ Princeton Jct, NJ 08550
609.799.5005 ■ www.cognetics.com