Give your website an oil change!

Your website and your car are more similar than you think. You put in a substantial investment up front when you acquired them, and you need to give them both maintenance if you want to keep them working properly.

Mechanics and car by Astrid Westvang via Flickr

Chances are good that if you want to keep your car running, you've spent some time and money giving it proper maintenance. But have you given any maintenance to your website since you launched it?

Manufacturers provide guidelines for car owners, making it easy to know when to do what. For example, most car owners are advised to give their vehicles an oil change approximately every 3,000 miles. You are also asked to take your car in for service at certain milestones (50,000 miles, etc.) to check out things like your brakes, hoses, and whatever else.

Depending on who developed your website, you may also have some guidance. However, there are many websites out there that haven't gotten their figurative oil changes lately. It's as if the website owners think that just putting up a website and

forgetting about it is enough. Unfortunately, if you don't give your website some maintenance, it will stop working properly for you.

Here are few things to check out on your website:

- Is it mobile-friendly?
- Is the contact information accurate?
- Do you have social media properties? Are they included?
- Are your links up to date?
- Are all your pages rendering properly?
- Is your content updated/accurate?
- What is the copyright information (hint: if it says copyright 2009, you need to update)
- If you list any personnel (staff, leadership, board), is the list complete and up to date?
- If you list services or products, do you still offer all of these?
- If you have pricing, is it accurate?
- Is your website software up to date?
- Is your domain registration in order?

This is not a comprehensive list. But if it's been a while since you gave your website any thought or attention, you may want to put it on your to-do list. You may even find that maintenance is not enough and that you need a complete overhaul.

It's no longer enough to just have a website. You must keep it up (or hire someone to do it for you).

What are your thoughts? When was the last time you took a look at your website?

Some weekend reading

I share so many articles every day on Twitter, and of those I save my favorites to Pocket (my favorite tool for saving articles). Starting today, I will do a weekly or biweekly round-up of great articles for weekend reading.

Here are three articles on writing and editing:

7 Self-Editing Tips for Reporters Without Copy Editors

Study Shows the Value of Copy Editing

11 easy ways to write more clearly

Here's a couple about websites and social media:

5 Things You Can Learn From a Poorly Designed Website

Is Social Media Actually Helping Your Company's Bottom Line?

Happy reading and have a great weekend!

How high is your website's barrier to entry?

Recently, I came across an article about how the Jewish online magazine Tablet is dealing with comments. It has decided to charge a fee to allow people to comment in order to make it

harder for trolls to post obnoxious (and often anti-Semitic) comments. But there is an unintended consequence, and that is that legitimate commenters will now be dissuaded from commenting as well. The barrier to entry may prove too high.

Have you ever thought about how a visitor interacts with your website? What does that person need to do to find what he or she is looking for? What information is crucial and how easy is it to access it?

If you have been seeing a low conversion rate on your website, a drop in visitors, or a high bounce rate, perhaps you need to examine whether you have created an unintended (and intangible) barrier to entry or have built a barrier to entry that is too high.

Many websites have barriers to entry. Some are easily "climbed" and some are like Mount Everest, impossible. Generally, these barriers include "mechanical" barriers such as subscription fees, sign up forms, or registration requirements. Some barriers are more subtle, intangible, but still make it hard for visitors to access your content.

Mechanical barriers: High, medium and low walls to climb

In an effort to generate revenue from online readers, newspapers have added online **subscription fees.** That's a high barrier to entry, since visitors will not only have to sign up, but provide payment. Some websites require **registration**, generally your email and a password. That's also a medium barrier to entry. Yet other websites splash a newsletter **sign-up** before you can read the content, but generally you can close that out making it a low barrier to entry.

There are good reasons to create these barriers. After all,

you may want to grow your marketing database or get some insight into who is visiting your website, or like many newspapers, you are looking for a source of revenue.

Intangible barriers: Creating a psychological "wall"

But barriers are not just mechanical or even visible. Your barriers to entry may be intangible and psychological. By that I mean that your barriers are tripping visitors' heads. For example, your **website navigation** may not be intuitive or clear and may make it hard to for visitors to find what they are looking for.

Another hard-to-quantify barrier is the **language** that you choose to use on your website. Many tech and government websites are flush with jargon that is *nearly unintelligible* to an outsider.

Some websites make it hard for visitors by having too much **content** or information to sort through. Have you ever landed on a page that made your eyes and head hurt from information overload (or worse, visual overload)? Then you probably know what I mean, and I bet you just went elsewhere.

How would you classify your website in terms of barrier to entry? High, medium or low? Is it what you want or are you unintentionally turning visitors away?

The 5 essential skills for great web writing

Web design keeps changing

The wonderful Leslie O'Flahavan gave a great presentation/workshop last week about new web design trends and how they affect web writing. You can download it here. Some of these trends include infinite scrolling (like on the Time Magazine website, where you can just keep scrolling down through endless articles) and the large-type front page (like this, on this page with A to X Writing Advice). There's also a trend to include pre-made shareable content (usually pre-written tweets).

***How* people access a website has to be considered**

Then there is the need (this is *not* a trend) to have everything visible and rendering appropriately on any device people happen to be using to access your website—desktop, laptop, tablet or smartphone. Type has to be readable. Although these issues are solvable by good design and web architecture, web writers have to consider these when deciding how to present which information.

Web writing is not quite the same as writing for print

Since most every business, nonprofit and news organization is on the web, web/content writing is probably the largest type of writing being done today. Yet, it is not as if you can just take your print materials, digitize them and call it a day. Clearly, there is a lot to consider when you are writing for the web.

What makes for a good web writer?

Can just anybody write for the web? Not really. I think people

can be taught how to write for the web, but not everybody has the ability to be like Leslie and be able to see what is going on in web design, spot trends and realize how these new changes affect web content.

The five essential skills of a great web writer:

1. The ability to spot the trends. This also means keeping on top of UX (user experience) and other issues that affect how websites are designed.

2. Understanding how the new design trends affect what you write. It's not enough to spot the trends. You need to be able to see how those trends impact what content should be included and how it should be written.

3. Ability to write in short and long formats. As Leslie describes in her presentation, there's the snack and then there's the meal. You have to be able to write short, snappy headlines but also be able to write longer, more "meaty" content.

4. Ability to synthesize information. You are called on to write short descriptions, whether it be for pre-made tweets or web page headings. In order to do this, you must be able to take a lot of information and condense it. It's helpful if you can explain things simply too.

5. Visual and design sensibility. Being able to understand the role that visual and design play in how a website is read and viewed is key, as the ability to work with graphic/web designers to make your content look appealing.

Have you noticed website writing has changed? Have you seen websites that look great but read poorly? What is your experience with web writing?

5 guaranteed ways to increase your website's bounce rate

Here are five guaranteed ways to increase the bounce rate on your website:

1. **Use a small font**. Or use a weird small font. Basically, make it hard for those of us forty-plus to read your content.

2. **Clutter, clutter everywhere**. Cram it full of stuff to make it seem like a contender for an episode of TV's Hoarders. Make it so busy I don't know where to look first. Or whether to look at all.

3. **Make the video (or audio) play automatically.** Bonus points if it is really loud.

4. **Make it hard to figure what you do, who you are or where you are located**. If you want to be even more obtuse, make sure to use excessive and meaningless jargon.

5. **Spelling and grammar mistakes galore mixed in with typos**.Certainly, don't bother proofreading.

Yes, the five ways to increase your bounce rate are the five ways to turn off potential website visitors. It's not good, and I have experienced all of them on websites recently.

Bouncing Ball by Dave Murphy on Flickr

Do you know what the bounce rate on your website is? I don't mean the term (just in case, Google Analytics defines it as the percentage of single-page sessions, where the user enters your site but does not interact or stay on your site), but the actual number.

If you don't know it, I suggest checking your Analytics right now. Basically, the higher the number, the worse your bounce rate. A high bounce rate indicates that people are just not interested in your website, which in turn indicates that you have a problem.

In reality, you want to lower your bounce rate. You want to have the visitors to your website stay and not bounce off. Notice that the bounce rate does not have to do with the number of visitors that land on your site, but rather the number that stays. So, if you have thousands of visitors, with a 95 percent bounce rate you are doing much worse than a site with a few dozen visitors and 65 percent bounce rate.

What makes you want to stay on the websites you visit? What makes you run away as fast as you can click that x on the browser tab?

Get this blog's content delivered to you

as soon as it is posted! Sign up on the right to get the blog posts emailed to you.

Is your website really working for you?

I am assuming your business/organization/service/product has a website. If not, well, that is another story. For the purposes of this post, you do have a website and it is functional. It may even be pretty (I mean "well designed").

But, and this is a big but, **does it have all the information that your AUDIENCE needs?**

I have been working on a project that involved getting information about documentaries from various sources, including the filmmakers' websites. The information I needed was fairly basic: synopsis of the film, year made, how long it is (running time), name of director and other people involved in production and country of origin. And guess what, even though virtually every film had a website, precious few websites had anything resembling basic information. Some listed awards or screenings. Some listed reviews. Some had blogs (not always updated) that talked about the filmmaking process. But basics—which are needed for anybody that is planning to screen a film—LACKING.

And that is not just limited to film websites. Have you ever gone to a restaurant website looking for a menu or for hours of operation and not found either? Have you tried to find a phone number from a service provider's website and be forced

to email or look for another provider?

It is truly astonishing how many websites lack basic, useful and needed information. Many sites get so caught up in bells and whistles (don't get me started on websites with flash or self-playing video) that they forget their basic mission is to provide information. Information that their target audience (read: potential customers) wants and needs.

Your website is not working for you if your target cannot find the information it needs.

Of course, this leads to another conversation that has to do with planning and strategy. Websites are not simply pretty things to make sure you have an internet presence. They play a big part in your communications and marketing efforts.

Before you build a website (and before you do anything communications-related)**, you must be able to answer these four questions**

1. Who is your target audience?
2. Why would they visit your website?
3. What are they going to do when they are on your site?
4. What information does your target audience absolutely, positively need? (Hint: it is always the stuff that is most basic—address, hours, location (map), telephone number, contact person/people, pricing, etc.)

What do you think? And more importantly, have you checked to see if your website is working for you?

Should you launch your business before your website?

At the gym today I saw a flyer for a private chef/prepared foods service. The concept is that you will get prepared meals delivered to your home on your schedule. What caught my eye was that at the bottom of the flyer it said: "Website coming soon."

This got me thinking: Should you launch your business without having a website in place? My gut tells me you should have your website up and running. However, nothing is so black and white, and probably, the answer depends on various factors, including:

- Type of business
- How you get business (referrals, word of mouth, advertising)
- Soft launch
- Size of business

Lastly, before launching, you need to understand how essential a website will be to your business. Will people need to consult your website to find out how to do business with you? In the case of the private chef, a potential customer may want to check out types of food you offer, testimonials, pricing, timing. Obviously, these questions can be answered by phone or in person too, but will you have time?

I think there is more to be gained by having your website up and running BEFORE you launch. Does this mean you can't launch a business without a website? No. But it could cause problems for you as you try to build up your customer base.

What do you think? Vote in the poll:

[yop_poll id="2″]

Why SEO and content marketing are not enough

The really bad news today is that the US government is shut down (let's hope temporarily). Another piece of bad news (for content marketers) is what I learned last night at the Web Content Mavens Meet Up about findability and search, and how search engine personalization is playing into it.

Findability is key

The first speaker last night was Jill MacNeice, who is an information architect for the Library of Congress (LOC). She explained how the LOC is working to make their millions of documents and images findable by using a "findability framework" that is built around the idea that people should be able to find what they are looking for both inside the site, and from external search engines. It makes search visible and easy to find. It depends on metadata, good descriptions and URL design that makes it human readable, shorter and more shareable.

The LOC is an example of why SEO and search in general is important. After all, if people can't find you, then why are you on the web?

Personalization throws a wrench in search

But then Katherine Watier Ong, Ketchum's VP of Online Strategy and Market Insights, got up to speak about personalization and the semantic web. And if I were to boil down what she said to one phrase it is that personalization is making search engine optimization more challenging. It is no longer enough to have the right keywords, tags and content because Google and Bing

and all your social media sites are personalizing the content they show you based on your profile and previous activity.

If you want to see how much information Google has about you, just check your Google Dashboard (search Google to find it). Bing uses your Facebook data to suggest things your friends like.

Did you know that you don't see every tweet in your Twitter stream? Twitter shows you what it "thinks" is most relevant to you, even from people you follow, based on your previous interactions and interests. Isn't that a tad scary? You sign up to follow someone and you may not see his/her tweets.

Katherine says the really creepy personalization is visible on LinkedIn. I have noticed that too recently. Since I liked a couple people's new photos, LinkedIn always shows me new photos and for several days. And how does it know which people I may know?

Search engines and social networks like Twitter and LinkedIn are moving toward developing a sort of artificial intelligence that tries to figure out what you are looking for and then practically jump ahead of your request, which is why you are seeing all these suggestions (you may want to follow so-and-so, you may want to check these items for sale, etc.)

All this personalization is useful for you because if not you would be drowning in extraneous information but it is really bad news for small businesses/websites. For example, search for your name on Google. For you, your name will appear at the top of your results. Now have John Doe do the same search on his computer wherever he may be living. Guess what, you will not appear near the top (unless you have a very unusual name or are someone like President Obama).

How do marketers deal with personalized results?

How do we work to cut through the personalization? Katherine

suggested several actions:

- Create personas for your target audience so you can market appropriately
- Personalize your website (just like when you go to Amazon and it recognizes you) using tools like Marketo.
- Build social relationships.
- Stay on top of changes in search
- Use a content management system (CMS) that uses schema

In short, **personalization is a big challenge for search marketers.** Now, you don't only need to cut through the clutter of millions of websites, you have to cut through results that are personalized for each searcher.

If you work in marketing or communications, you need to be aware of how people find you. It is not enough to have a website and a blog. You have to understand SEO and the latest changes to search. You have to see the relationships between social media and search engines.

Where is the soap dish? (Or why UX is important.)

Several weeks ago, I told you all about the awful experience that passes itself of as the Holiday Inn Express. One of the smaller, yet super annoying, things wrong there was the fact that in the (cramped) bathroom, there was no soap dish. A stand holding the usual hotel toiletries, including soap bars, was cluttering the minimal counter space, but there was no place to put the soap once you opened the plastic wrapping.

The soap kept sliding to the floor after I washed my hands.

Soap by Radio.Guy on Flickr

Just a few weeks before my stay at the HIE, I stayed at a boutique inn in the same city. Among the many amenities was a soap dish in the bathroom. It was a nice touch. It showed the inn had considered the guest's needs (and that someone somewhere had actually used soap to wash their hands at some point, which apparently the managers at the HIE never had done).

It's really very simple: You have to consider people's needs and how they do things. Providing a great hotel experience OR an effective website DEPENDS on whether you are considering your end user (your guest, your audience). How does a person use your product? What does a person need to navigate your site?

Have you ever been to a website where you can't find what you are looking for? I bet you have! Those websites are generally cluttered with tons of information that is not organized for the user but rather for the idiosyncrasies of the various organizational departments (Sales & Promotion says we need to include this, Legal says we have to include that).

The other day I was looking for a blog on an organizational website and I didn't see it where you would normally. I figured it did not exist. I was wrong. It was under "publications." Why? Because the Publications Department is in charge of the blog. Publications clearly doesn't understand website visitors. Those visitors aren't familiar with (nor do they care about) your organizational hierarchy!

This is where user experience or UX comes in. UX specialists are there to make your website friendly to visitors. If a visitor wants to find your calendar of events, he or she will find it easily instead of clicking through various places. There are ways to make website navigation easy and sensible.

Perhaps you are a small organization that can't afford to hire a usability expert to assess and fix your website. Just think about the soap dish. Do you have what your visitors need? Where would they easily find it?

If you fail to think about how people actually use your product or service, then you will fail to serve their needs.

Are you reinforcing your message?

I had a conversation with a potential client the other day, and she was saying she wasn't sure she needed to continue advertising as most of her customers came from word of mouth/referral.

Word-of-mouth and referrals are very powerful marketing

forces, but they do not operate in a vacuum. Most people take their time making a decision, even when they have a referral (or referrals) in hand. People often like to do some research themselves, even when they have glowing recommendations (just because a hair salon did wonders for straight-haired Jane does not mean they can do wonders for curly-haired Joan). This is why you need to reinforce your message.

Often, you need to remind your potential clients/customers of why they should consider working for you. You also need to let them know the basics: how to contact you, where you are located, who you work with, how much you charge, what your services/products are.

How do you reinforce your message? You can do it several ways:

1. Have an updated, attractive, easy-to-navigate website.

2. Have marketing materials such as ads, brochures, etc. as necessary for your target. For example, if your target audience reads specialized journals, it makes sense to advertise there. If your target walks past your store, it may make sense to have brochures or information cards available.

3. Have an updated, complete LinkedIn profile and on other social media channels as appropriate.

Relying on word of mouth without reinforcing the positive referral will not always result in business for you and could actually work against you.

What are you doing to reinforce your message?