4 items to check on your website

Have you checked your website lately? Chances are good that you haven't, especially if it is built on a non-blogging platform. But go ahead, check it for these four items today.

1. **Does it load quickly?** How long does it take for the average person to open your website? If it takes too long, you may lose that person.
2. **Does it load correctly?** Are all the pages formatted correctly, and is the format readable? I have opened pages only to find HTML gobbledygook.
3. **Is the contact information current and accurate?** The basics—address, phone, email—should all be up to date and you should make sure they are correct.
4. **Do you provide the information your prospective customers or clients need?** If you are a retail location, do you have your hours posted? If you are a restaurant, do you have your menu posted? If you are a salon, do you have a listing (including pricing) of your services?

It is worth remembering that people go to websites to find useful information. If they can't access your website or find the information they need, THEY WILL GO ELSEWHERE.

What types of things do you look for in a website? What turns you away?

You may be overlooking something

If you blog, for yourself or for your organization, do you know what your blog looks like to the outside world? How are your readers seeing you? Are they subscribing in a reader, via email or just visiting your blog? Are those visitors sharing your blog? If so, how are they doing it?

(Caffeinated tip of a few days ago was to make sure your blog is shareable.)

Many bloggers out there, including those that blog for large organizations, are NOT checking to see how their blog looks. I can tell you because there are several I follow in my Google Reader. Here are several fixable mistakes these bloggers are making:

- Duplicating entries
- Having no title appear for the blog or having a generic title like "Most Recent Entries."
- No sharing button
- Sharing button that does not fill in information when you share so the post only has a link and no title.
- Only sharing the first line of the post
- Not allowing sharing from the reader
- Not having a visible RSS feed or email subscription tab on your blog

Happily, all these are fixable. Start by following your own blog via RSS feed in a reader and via email subscription. Use your sharing button to see how (and if) it works. You may be overlooking something that will turn off one of your readers. You should probably view the blog on someone else's computer too.

You may be overlooking something. Protect your brand and your

What are you all about?

When you visit a website, particularly for a company you may want to do business with, do you check out the "about" page? I always do. I want to know who I am dealing with.

When I write an "about" page for a client, I always concentrate on facts. In a sense, I am doing the journalism 101 treatment: who, what, where, when, why and how. In my book, that is what an "about" page should answer for website visitors. If you go to my website, my about page has my bio (the who, why, when, where) and my business philosophy (the how).

Another thing to remember when you are writing an about page: people do business with people. People don't do business with concepts or grand ideas. People choose you based on your qualifications (and maybe your likability, who you know, what you know).

Recently, I came across a business and checked out their about page. I wanted to know who was behind this company. And this is part of what I found:

> *XXX provides business integration solutions, our focus is on helping organizations capitalize on information management by designing programs that sustain business goals and objectives. With expertise in Business Process Management, Enterprise Architecture and Knowledge Management; XXX are passionate about helping organizations increase customer satisfaction, providing solid frameworks for continuous improvement and aligning technology catalog with core*

business objectives. XXX merges the right technology solutions with sound information management practices to provide customers with smart customized, future-forward, business integration solutions.

I blocked out the company name of course, but does this description tell you anything? I have no idea what these people do or who they are, but I do know they love jargon. What the heck is a "smart customized, future-forward, business integration solution?"

As they say on Twitter, this is a FAIL!

The Caffeinated take-away:

To have a truly useful "about" page, go back to basics. Who are you? What do you do? Where are you located? When did you start doing what you are doing? How do you do what you do? Why do you do it? Answer those questions and get yourself a good description. It may actually help your business.

Share / Save

Do you value your website?

Any business that does not have a website in 2010 is probably at a huge disadvantage. Back in the day, people used phone books to look things up. Not anymore. Google is the phone book of the 21st Century, and woe to those who are not being found by the search engine.

But you have a website, right? And not only do you have a

website, you value your website too. You know it's as good as gold in getting business (or for nonprofits, supporters/volunteers/donors) for your product/service? But, too many organizations take their website for granted. They either don't touch it once it is up or they are always changing it up.

Take CNN.com for instance. The web site was redesigned a few months ago, and in my opinion, made it completely difficult to find the news, which, presumably, is what CNN offers. I used to visit CNN all the time. Now, I don't. This is not to say that you should never redesign your website. You should. Your website should be as updated as possible. Say I go to a restaurant's website, and the only menu posted is the winter menu. But it is summer. You get my drift.

Valuing your website means providing your visitors with what they need and expect.

Do you value your website? How many of the following do you agree with?

- I had my website professionally designed
- I have had a third-party evaluation of my website to check content, ease of navigation and usability.
- My website is fully up to date
- I have made sure to make my website search engine friendly
- I have a list of keywords and I have used the on my website
- I have a blog
- I have a newsroom or similar in which I post my organization's latest news
- My latest news is dated no earlier than 2010
- My web host is reliable and I have very little if any downtime
- I have made my website social media friendly (share buttons, Twitter/Facebook links, etc.)

How did you fare? To really value your website, you should have agreed with most, if not all, of these statements.

Lisa Barone has written an excellent blog post: 11 Reasons Customers Don't Trust Your Website, which points out 11 things to watch out for. And according to Daniel Kehrer at Small Business CEO, one of the 13 Mistakes that Can Jinx your Business, is to let your website go dormant.

Value your website. It is a primary source of business.

Why should I hire YOU?

What do I need to know in order to make a decision about hiring you? That is what your ABOUT section on your blog or website must answer. On the rare occasion that someone is going to make a decision about contracting services or buying products from you, that person will want to know your credentials.

Here are a few questions that you should answer:

- How long have you been in business?
- What is your experience?
- Do you have any special credentials?
- What makes you special?
- Who are you?
- Where or with whom have you worked?

Recently, I was "shopping" for a doctor. The insurance website listing is not helpful other than to give me the distance the doctor is located from my house and where he or she went to

school. So I checked to see if some of the practices had websites. I found one that was very simple yet answered questions I had: does the practice do its own lab work? What kind of healthcare do they practice? What are the doctors' backgrounds? It all sounded good to me and now I have an appointment. I will let you know.

On the other hand, I came across a new marketing company's website. Their "About us" says this:

> We are uniquely qualified "marketing experts" as our seasoned management team has a combined 50 years of success in executing revenue generating strategies across numerous industries. We've been the leaders of Sales, Marketing, Business Development and Product Marketing teams. We have made cold calls, designed and launched products, catapulted public relation campaigns, pontificated press releases, and of course, successfully executed hundreds of marketing campaigns for small, medium, and large businesses.
>
> Our team not only creates the programs, they are on the front lines executing and analyzing them. However, our success isn't measured in our experience and ROI alone. We are customers too and know the importance of rapport-building and customer service. We treat each customer as honor, and mind our customer's marketing campaigns as they were for our own company.

Why not tell me who you are, with whom you have worked, and where you are located, for starters? Hell, I am a "seasoned marketing expert" myself, right? (Not to mention the excessive capitalization.)

What other things do you look for when you are looking to hire/contract/buy services? Comments please!

Words are Key

Keywords. They are the mantra of the Search Engine Optimization (SEO) people. Some websites are written in a weird, keyword heavy format to make them seem like candy for the search engines. Websites also have metatags and alt-text and other areas for keywords. Search engines read text, which is why content is king on the Internet. Search engines do not read images, unless they are labeled or tagged.

Some companies set up blogs just to increase their likelihood of being found. And SEO people think you should have keywords there too.

If you ever doubted that keywords are important, then do a little experiment on Twitter. Use a keyword like marketing, writing, or golf (if that is your thing) and see how many people start following you. Yesterday, I re-tweeted a story about the Christian Science Monitor getting rid of its religion reporter (fairly ironic, and that is why I shared it). Guess what, no less than three people of a heavy Christian persuasion started following me. Even though none of my posts and my bio say anything about Christianity. These people were simply keyword surfing and leeched on to the word Christian in Christian Science Monitor.

So, how do you create a list of keywords? Easy. Start with your industry and work from there. Say you are a civil engineer. You would have the following: engineering, civil engineering, building, and so on. The important thing is to think of variations and related words. If you are in advertising, you would naturally choose marketing, and perhaps sales. You may also want to include location (city, state, country) and specialties. You may want to use the names of

your principals. **Just ask yourself: what would people ask if they needed to find me or someone that does what I do?**

Final thought: a popular word on this blog has been Twitter. In fact, I am sure if I tagged this article with the word Twitter, I will get plenty of search engine hits.

The dawn of a new (communications) era

One of the first things that signaled the start of the new Obama administration was the changeover of the Whitehouse.gov website. The new website, which shares many elements with the Obama campaign website, was up and running at 12 noon, even before the flubbed swearing-in took place. In a sense, the new website is the product of people who haven't been in the White House very long. It still has the campaign feel, talking about the Agenda, and showing the Whistle Stop tour Obama and Biden took the weekend before the Inaugural. What is more updated about the website is that you can now sign up for email updates and like many other organizational websites in America today, it has a blog. And, as the website claims:

"WhiteHouse.gov will be a central part of
President Obama's pledge to make his
the most transparent and accountable
administration in American history."

The website has been getting a lot of attention. Here's an article from Politico via Yahoo on the presidential bios on the website.

Obama will certainly be a more "electronic" president. Much has been made about his BlackBerry "addiction." He was able to garner much of his support among the GenY/media/social media savvy people because of his campaign know-how regarding Web 2.0. Let's see how this plays out.

Update: Interesting takefrom the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on the PR skills of the new administration, helping create a positive perception, and apparently an area where Bush was not as media-savvy.

Information that bears repeating

I have blogged about this before but I don't think it can be stressed enough: do your materials provide enough information to your prospects? Lately, I have come across several websites, notably, government websites, that simply do not provide enough information or make it difficult to find said information. Here are some examples:

US Capitol tours: no information regarding using public transportation to get there or a map pointing out the nearest Metro stops. Very little information about anything else. How long is the tour? What is permitted and not permitted? Not to mention how unfriendly this site is. If a government bureaucrat didn't personally design and write this, one of his/her scared minions did.

US Naval Academy tours: When do the tours start? Where is there parking? How about using public transportation to get to the academy? How long are the tours?

Glen Echo Park: Typical of most National Park Service websites, minimal information. The home page has a link for direction at the very bottom of the page. The About Us has another link to directions. What about hours? Not listed at all, except for the cafe.

This list is simply from my personal experience in the past three weeks. How many more websites are out there that just don't give enough information?

If you have a website, you would do well to look at it from an outsider's perspective. Here are is a small list of items to consider:

- Is your contact information easily accessible?
- If I have never before heard of your business or organization, will I understand what you do?
- Have you listed your services and explained them?
- If you are open to the public, are your hours, admissions fees, directions to your facility, parking and transportation and other information the public needs to know clearly and prominently posted?
- If you are a restaurant, have you posted a sample menu?
- If I don't understand what you have written, is there an alternative way to contact you?
- Is your information up to date?
- Is your layout (including fonts, etc) easy to read and navigate? Things to consider are busyness (too much information or graphics), font size, background, colors and optimization for different web browsers.

Websites

Today, it is imperative to have a website. No doubt. However, just having a website is not enough. In the last few days, I have been doing research for a trip, and have come across several great websites, but also, some not so great websites. What makes a great website? I will give you my breakdown:

- Easy to navigate (this means no funky/weird pull down menus or navigation that is not available on every page)
- All the necessary information is readily available (contacts, address, etc) and easily accessible
- Updated regularly (no 2006 information for instance)
- Aesthetically pleasing—not busy or dated
- No dead links or pages
- Looks professional
- Not overly busy or with screaming graphics
- Not too much flash and no sound

It would be useful for website owners to have someone look at their website from the "outside." Sometimes you forget the user!