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Is Your Website Doing Its Job?

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The way we are doing business is changing.

It's not good enough to have a pretty website with a bit of static content and a few forms to gather contact information. Having a website that does its job is no longer a should have, it's a must have because customers are doing their own online research and reading reviews about your company before they reach out to make contact.

> **61% OF GLOBAL INTERNET USERS RESEARCH PRODUCTS ONLINE.[1]**

To be effective online, businesses need to have a clearly defined vision for what their website needs to be doing.

Ask yourself a few questions:
• Why do you have a website?
• What is the main purpose of your website?
• What is it primarily intended to do?

The answers to these questions will help you focus your online strategy.

Different Goals Take Different Strategies

Before starting any online overhaul, you need to figure out what your website really needs to do and who you want to talk to because different sites and different audiences need a different approach.

Many businesses think that a nice looking website that is reflective of your brand and tuned for Search Engine Optimization (SEO) means your website is doing its job. It's not. It's the equivalent of having your very best sales rep (your website) only achieving 80% of their target quota.

An effective website strategy goes beyond SEO. It starts with a clear and well-articulated idea of what you want your website to do for you. And, while many businesses may find the job they want their website to do crosses a few categories, it's critical to set priorities for your website and then tailor the structure and design to meet those primary goals.

> **92% OF COMPANIES WITH ANNUAL REVENUES OF $250,000 OR LESS GENERATE 10,000 OR FEWER MONTHLY WEBSITE VISITORS. FOR $1 BILLION COMPANIES, THE REVERSE IS TRUE: 92% GENERATE MORE THAN 10,000 VISITORS PER MONTH.2.[17]**

LEAD GENERATION – This is the number one job of the website for many companies. With the growing number of people doing online research before buying, having a strong online and search presence is job #1.

SALES – Beyond finding new leads, some businesses need e-commerce capabilities to sell products and services directly to customers. Having the capacity for online orders or purchases can reduce overhead since you won't need as many "operators standing by". Customer service and satisfaction will improve because people can buy what they need, when they need it. It also means you can be making money whether your actual office is open or not, which will help your bottom line.

> **IN 2016, E-COMMERCE REVENUE REACHES US $18,338 MILLION IN CANADA 3 AND US $322,171 MILLION IN THE US.[4]**

CUSTOMER SELF SERVICE – There are companies in the enviable position of having a monopoly or few direct competitors but they still need a solid website dedicated to customer self-service. Self-service websites can have a direct impact on a company's productivity while greatly improving efficiency. It can handle customer queries, give customers online control over their account, provide answers to common questions or perform routine tasks. A customer self-service website can also reduce the need for staff to answer calls, boost efficiency AND improve customer satisfaction.

AUTOMATE DATA COLLECTION – When a company routinely collects or needs to use specific information to conduct business, having online forms that easily gather that data and put it into a format staff can use saves time, speeds response time and is, quite simply, more efficient. Ensuring that your website can be viewed and data submitted from any type of device (with a mobile-first strategy) boosts accessibility which can make your company even more attractive to customers who are increasingly using phones and tablets for their transactions.

EDUCATE – Whether we're talking about educating customers about your products and services, or becoming a trusted source of information, an educational-style website needs great content and reliable data.

> **86% OF CONSUMERS SAY THAT USING A SEARCH ENGINE ALLOWED THEM TO LEARN SOMETHING NEW OR IMPORTANT.[1]**

ATTRACT INVESTORS – Companies that are publicly-traded have strict rules to follow regarding shareholder disclosure and the provision of company information, and when it comes to bringing in new shareholders or increasing capital, providing high quality, attractive and informative content can assist with investment decision-making and attract new investors. A shareholder or investor website can help keep investors informed of new corporate information, and become the portal for all investment information, not to mention house (and host) AGMs or shareholder conference calls.

> **98% OF B2B BUYERS DO SOME ONLINE RESEARCH.[5]**

Stop Driving Your Customers Out the Door

Focus on your online experience

Once you've determined the role you need your website to play in your business, it's time to turn your attention to making sure the experience you are delivering is the one you intend.

Take some time and consider:

• Is your target audience spending less and less time on your website?
• Have you seen a lot of traffic on your ecommerce site but no one is buying?
• Do you find shopping carts being abandoned at check-out?
• Are prospects coming to your home page and leaving immediately?
• Have you often sat back wondering why your social media, SEO and flashy website
  are failing to meet your goals?

If you found yourself saying yes, your website is likely failing to do its job effectively, and the culprit is very likely the user experience (UX) you've created.

USER EXPERIENCE (UX) is the user's qualitative and emotional impression when interacting with your site as well as their experience performing tasks. Improving usability and enhancing ease-of-use, while making your site intuitive and enjoyable, leads to a positive user experience.

USER INTERFACE (UI) speaks to the look and feel, as well as the layout, navigation controls, labels and content, and how the information is organized.

UX and UI are overlapping concepts, but when you combine both effectively, visitors will be able to interact intuitively and seamlessly with your site, creating a positive experience.

Setting Priorities

When designing your web application or website, you need to set priorities based on the purpose you've defined. If your website's purpose is for customer self-service, you wouldn't want to bury account access three layers deep. If you have an e-commerce site, you want your customers to be able to find what they are looking to buy as quickly as possible and to make it as easy as possible to complete a purchase in the fewest possible clicks.

> **"YOUR OBJECTIVE SHOULD ALWAYS BE TO ELIMINATE INSTRUCTIONS ENTIRELY BY MAKING EVERYTHING SELF-EXPLANATORY, OR AS CLOSE TO IT AS POSSIBLE. WHEN INSTRUCTIONS ARE ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY, CUT THEM BACK TO A BARE MINIMUM … THE FACT THAT THE PEOPLE WHO BUILT THE SITE DIDN'T CARE ENOUGH TO MAKE THINGS OBVIOUS—AND EASY—CAN ERODE OUR CONFIDENCE IN THE SITE AND THE ORGANIZATION BEHIND IT."**
>
> *Steve Krug, Don't Make Me Think, Revisited A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability.* [5]

How to Get the User Experience and Design Right

DON'T MAKE THEM THINK: Your customers or users shouldn't wonder what a link does or the function of a button and feel they have to click to figure it out. You're making them work for no reason, which will lead to frustration and abandonment. Make it crystal clear what links and buttons do.

DEFINE STRUCTURE: In most applications and website design, 90% of people use only 10% of functions. A good user interface makes those 10% functions easy to find at the highest level and from all devices. The rest of the functions while important, can be easily found in the second or third levels. Knowing that needs to be in that top 10% comes back to defining the purpose of your website.

DON'T HIDE: While 10% of the content is the most used, don't make it hard to find the remaining 90% (or worse, make your customers seek out help or read a manual). Have all the content discoverable, just don't clutter the topline information that the majority will use.

KEEP IT SIMPLE: Everyone uses websites differently and for different reasons. By making it easy to get to the information people want, the better their overall impression of your site and your company.

TEST YOUR ASSUMPTIONS: We all think we know what our customers want, but do we really? It's important to recognize the value of testing your assumptions, application or site to ensure you're hitting the intended mark.

DESIGN IS SUBJECTIVE: Understanding your target audience's demographics, preferences, and personality can help you hone the design to better resonate with their own personal experience, ensuring a positive experience with your website or application.

THINK ABOUT MOBILE: The time to cater to desktop users alone is long past. Consider how users will connect from a range of different devices and make sure that experience is consistent across all device types.

OFFER FEEDBACK: When a user completes a task or fills in a form, let them know the process is complete. All too often you click a button to complete a task and never really know if anything even happened. Tell users, don't leave them in the dark or keep them guessing.

DON'T REINVENT THE WHEEL: There are standard colours, icons and methods that provide sub-conscious information - like using green for accepted or task completed, red for missing information/error, a house icon signaling the home page or a question mark for help. You don't need to create a whole new set of icons or navigation structure. Use the ones people are familiar with so they don't have to learn a whole new language.

BE CONSISTENT: From the language you use (first versus third person) to the style, navigation and colours, consistency lets users feel familiar with your site and familiarity translates to comfort and ease of interaction, all of which produce a positive user experience.

And Now You Test

In the quest to develop an exceptional website or application, you shouldn't be afraid to put it to the test – it will only make the end-product better.

There are many different types of testing that can and should be part of delivering an excellent user experience on your website or application, one of which is usability testing.

The best way to create an interface that users don't have to think about, is by adhering to best practice design principles (outlined above) and by conducting usability testing.

Why's usability so important?

Usability testing quickly lets you know if your user interface will get the passing grade from your most important critics – your users.

Quite simply, a bad user experience could sound the death knell for your online presence (or application), pushing users to go elsewhere to get what they want and need.

What's usability?

One of the best definitions of usability comes from Nielsen/Norman: [7]

"Usability is a **quality attribute** that assesses how easy user interfaces are to use. The word 'usability' also refers to methods for improving ease-of-use during the design process.

Usability is defined by 5 quality components:

LEARNABILITY: How easy is it for users to accomplish basic tasks the first time they encounter the design?

EFFICIENCY: Once users have learned the design, how quickly can they perform tasks?

MEMORABILITY: When users return to the design after a period of not using it, how easily can they re-establish proficiency?

ERRORS: How many errors do users make, how severe are these errors, and how easily can they recover from the errors?

SATISFACTION: How pleasant is it to use the design?"

To verify these key components were addressed in the design and make sure your website or application meet the key criteria for usability, we conduct usability tests.

WHY DO WE NEED USABILITY TESTING

Usability testing lets us know if our assumptions are right and if users find it as easy as we think it should be to complete all their tasks. It helps uncover problems with an application's interface or layout. When it comes to building websites, we can get too close to the process and think we know how users will interact with it.

HOW IS IT DONE

An online or one-on-one exercise where a facilitator sits with a user and observes a user's attempts to complete a set number of tasks. They are also asked to talk through the steps needed to complete the tasks as they attempt them. The test is designed to look at how users think the tasks can be accomplished.

WHEN IS IT NEEDED

It can (and should) be done a few times starting early during the development process to minimize a cascade effect when changes are made at late stages of development.

TARGETED TESTS

Users selected to test the application or website should represent the user community. It won't help you to know your site is easy to use among highly computer literate millennials if your target group is retirees with basic computing skills.

WHITECAP PUTS USABILITY TO THE TEST

At Woodbine Entertainment Group, we did extensive usability testing using both online testing tools and in-person sessions with both existing and new customers for the new HPIBET.com horserace wagering application. The tests helped us to verify the user interface was intuitive, easy to use and new features were easy to find.

During one usability test we discovered that the search bar was not as evident as we thought it was. A quick re-design allowed us to improve the experience dramatically.

Handling the Traffic

Once you know your site is user-friendly, you need to make sure it can handle the volume of traffic you're anticipating. There is nothing more frustrating for a website visitor than to be waiting for pages to load or get timed out while they're completing a transaction.

Do you really think they will try to buy again if their first experience is frustrating?

A SINGLE SECOND LOAD TIME DELAY ON YOUR WEBSITE CAN CAUSE 7% LOSS IN CONVERSION.[8]

Companies in the e-commerce space, those in the financial industry or companies which have customer traffic spikes (like our client Woodbine Entertainment Group) require the capacity to handle the load while remaining responsive. Load testing can help verify customers are getting the experience you want during both quiet hours and peak times.

Load testing can alert a company to potential issues before a successful marketing campaign spikes traffic (which is a good thing) then crashes the servers (which isn't).

What's Load Testing?

Load testing is the process of pushing a website, services or application with tasks designed to simulate the things a customer will attempt. But rather than sending one task through at a time, load testing sends thousands of test simultaneously to monitor behavior at the upper capacity limits of the infrastructure.

It's important to differentiate between load testing, which targets a specific traffic threshold, and stress testing, which seeks to identify the maximum number concurrent requests a system can handle.

Load testing is done in a controlled testing environment to more accurately simulate what happens in the real world when traffic levels peak.

For e-commerce, online stores, financial institutions and any company that needs their site to respond quickly whether there's 1,000 or 100,000 visitors, the site or application should be put to the test.

HERE ARE THE TOP REASONS COMPANIES SHOULD LOAD TEST:

- Check response times under heavy user loads
- Uncover hardware issues or hardware limitations
- Locate bottlenecks that could impact performance
- Monitor the behavior of the application or website under heavy loads in a test setting (rather than waiting for a successful campaign before realizing your infrastructure can't scale to meet the demands)
- Verify whether updates or enhancements to a site or application have impacted performance
- Know if hardware configuration will appropriately to handle the spikes in traffic (and add or remove servers as necessary)

40% OF WEB USERS WILL ABANDON A WEBSITE IF IT TAKES LONGER THAN 3 SECONDS TO LOAD.[8]

Once you know your infrastructure can handle the demands, you're ready to start promoting your site or application and build a following.

SEO's Integral Role

A website can only be effective if customers and prospects can find it.

> **THERE ARE MORE THAN 1 BILLION WEBSITES WITH MORE ARE THAT BEING ADDED EVERY SINGLE MINUTE.[9]**

With growing competition, it can be hard to rise above the noise in the online business community you are trying to tap into. Within your own marketplace or industry, an online presence is likely the norm, which means you need to find ways to rank above your competitors to secure more leads from online search.

To attract attention, be found faster, and rank higher than your competitors requires an effective Search Engine Optimization (SEO) strategy.

> **93% OF ONLINE EXPERIENCES BEGIN WITH A SEARCH ENGINE LIKE GOOGLE, BING, OR YAHOO.[10]**

SEO can be difficult to understand, and even harder to harness but quite simply, SEO helps make it easier for search engines to find and categorize your company, your information and your content. Here's how search results are delivered:

CRAWLING – Computers crawl the internet to create and update the comprehensive, searchable list of all pages online.

INDEXING – The words that the computers crawling the internet see on the page are compiled into a massive index so that search engines know what your page is about and how it should be categorized when responding to a search query.

SERVING – Indexed pages are matched to the search query and the search engine "serves" up what it believes are the most relevant results.

Some important definitions:

KEYWORDS

A particular word or phrase that describes the contents of a web page and is used as a shortcut to define what is on the page for analysis and ranking by search engines.

TAGGING

Unlike hashtags that are visible, meta tags used for SEO are in the code and not visible on the page. They act as content descriptors that help tell search engines what a web page is about.

STRUCTURED DATA

This is how you annotate or mark up your content so machines can understand it and index it easier. Using structured data makes content eligible for Enhanced Presentation in Search Results, can help to identify and promote local business and be presented for expertise in Knowledge Graph. [11]

SEMANTIC MARK-UP

Coding on a page containing meta data describing its purpose. It helps to provide context that is easily readable and indexed by search engines, including mark-up of authorship, videos, events and places. Semantic search 12. is changing search from focusing on specific words to attempting to define the intent and context of a search query.

ON-PAGE ELEMENTS

Defines how each page is viewed by search engines and how the content is treated including title tags, how you define internal URLs, links and the coding on images and videos.

OFF-PAGE ELEMENTS

Links to your site from other websites. (Think about the work you're doing to build social media profile and blogging as examples.

The science of SEO is extremely important if you are going to be found online. It takes constant attention and nurturing to maintain high rankings.

Knowing what search engines are looking for will help companies improve their ranking and could involve targeting the right keywords and phrases, ensuring all your content is annotated correctly so that machines can understand it.

It is also important to understand how Google handles searches and analytics because it is the most popular search platform used more than 67% of the time[13] (significantly higher than the next most popular search engine Bing at 13%). And, when it comes to mobile search, Google captures 94% of the market.[13]

ON AVERAGE, GOOGLE PROCESSES OVER 40,000 SEARCH QUERIES EVERY SECOND.[14]

Make It Mobile

When it comes to your online strategy, making sure your website does its job whether your customer is viewing it from a desktop, laptop, tablet or mobile device is no longer optional. It is a necessity.

A responsive site will elevate your mobile search ranking and is becoming increasingly critical given Google's[15] continuing efforts to reward companies who take a mobile-first strategy. The importance of prioritizing mobile is evident when you consider mobile data traffic is projected to grow 53% in the next five years.[16]

24.5% OF ONLINE HOLIDAY PURCHASES WERE DONE ON A MOBILE DEVICE (PHONE OR TABLET) IN 2014.[17]

Harnessing Potential

Think of SEO as your top sales executive working hard in the background to find and qualify leads. Industry insiders have determined that SEO leads average close rates of 14.6%, while outbound marketing tactics (such as cold calls or print advertising) average close rates of 1.7%.[18]

Like many other aspects of online visibility, SEO isn't a set it and forget it formula. To consistently rank highly on searches, you have to be updating your content, working with keywords and being active online.

Is Your Social Media Strategy Doing Its Job?

To get noticed in the past, companies would use outbound marketing techniques such as flyers, mailings, cold-calling and generic email blasts, or pop up ads and banners.

In today's online environment, customers tune out companies using outdated approaches. In the B2B space, today's business executives are very busy and won't tolerate companies interrupting their day, or flow of activities for very long. It's just downright annoying!

> **THE B2B E-COMMERCE MARKET IS PROJECTED TO BECOME TWO TIMES BIGGER THAN THE B2C MARKET ($3.2 TRILLION) BY 2020.[19]**

Enter Social Media

Social media provides customers with access to product and service information, reviews and company profiles on their timetable, when they have time and when they want your information. It's on their schedule, not yours.

Some business leaders think social media is not important to their business and that it takes employees' time and attention away from their work, but social media can be a powerful promotional and even collaborative tool that helps businesses IF it's leveraged correctly.

Almost 1/3 of the world's population use social media, (up 10% in the past twelve months), while mobile access to social media is up 17%.[20]

What business wouldn't benefit from even a fraction of that face time?

There is a power shift underway that is impacting the relationship between businesses and their customers. Customers are arming themselves with information, have done their homework and are coming to you when they've reached an advanced buying stage.

New business prospects are contacting you because they want what you are selling so they are far more qualified than those prospects you might have reached in the past by cold-calling.

LAST YEAR, 93% OF WHITECAP'S NEW BUSINESS CAME FROM CUSTOMERS WHO FOUND US ONLINE.

Social media lets you provide your customers with information and content they can review at their leisure. With the popularity of a wide range of social media channels, this platform provides a very easy tool for staying top of mind with your customers, without interrupting their day with information they don't want. And, the content you're promoting on social media is driving visitors all back to your website, which is helping to build page views, online traffic and ultimately new business leads.

Think about social media as a publishing tool that helps to direct and drive traffic to your website (which in turn helps your website do its job more effectively).

PEOPLE SPEND AN AVERAGE OF 1.72 HOURS PER DAY ON SOCIAL PLATFORMS.[21]

Like any marketing initiative, you need to understand how to be effective in the diverse social communities.

DO YOUR RESEARCH. Know which social media channels reach your target audience and focus efforts there. LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, and Snapchat, as well as messaging apps, all have a different audience or target. Understanding your target audience, their demographic profile, and their social media behavior can help your social strategy do its job more effectively.

DON'T BLINDLY SPAM. When it comes to delivering content, you can overwhelm your audience by filling their feeds with too much content. Time your content releases. Less can be more.

DO CREATE VALUABLE CONTENT. Customers are looking for information and educational content. Take the time to develop new material and provide insights that are relevant to your industry.

DON'T JUST SHARE LINKS. If all you're doing is pointing to other sites, your customers will stop following you and start following them. If you find interesting and relevant content, take the time to add value by offering your point of view (POV) or distilling the information about the piece before sending it to your customers.

DO OPTIMIZE CONTENT APPROPRIATELY. Understand the strengths of each social media platform and how users behave there. There are social media channels that are driven by visuals and others that are more text driven. Optimize your content for each platform to maximize impact and deliver content the way people expect in that particular channel.

Deliver Great Content - Start Blogging

Once you've embraced the idea of social media, you'll quickly realize content is needed to keep in touch with your followers.

Blogging is important to business today including, new business development and lead generation, as well as expanding an online presence.

Why are blogs so important to business? Because people are reading them and those regular readers are likely prospective customers. Recent statistics show 82% of people who blog regularly acquired at least one new customer using their blog and 79% of companies who blog report positive ROI for inbound marketing.[1]

Even five years ago, it would have been hard to make the case for blogging, but today blogging is vital to business development, because social media has changed the world's landscape dramatically.

Transforming the Online Experience

Websites of the past were little more than one-sided conversations of static information and early blogs were just online diaries made possible by the social web (Web 2.0), which made it easy for users to generate content on the fly with little technical expertise.

Today's internet is much more interactive thanks in part to social media. People expect a two-way conversation and to be able to interact directly and instantly with a company to share ideas or opinions.

> **OVER 2 MILLION BLOGS[22] ENTER THE BLOGOSPHERE. (THE ONLINE COMMUNITY OF BLOGGERS) EVERY DAY**

Companies have also realized that bloggers and blogging can be influential by providing educational content, trusted opinion, reviews and guidance for their followers (which includes customers and prospects).

HERE ARE SOME OF THE TOP REASONS COMPANIES BLOG:

- Connect with customers
- Reach new prospects
- Inform and educate
- Stimulate thought, creativity and new ideas
- Be a catalyst for new and important conversations within my customers' companies
- Provide social media content
- Boost search rankings

Blogging lets companies have a conversation with customers, while delivering native content, which helps build profile and search rankings.

81% OF CUSTOMERS DO ONLINE RESEARCH BEFORE MAKING A PURCHASE, AND 61% OF THOSE CUSTOMERS READ REVIEWS BEFORE BUYING.[23]

If you're still on the fence about why you need to be blogging, know that there's a fundamental change underway in the way you need to talk with your customers. Your customers are much more savvy than in the past and are actively seeking out information before making a purchase or engaging with a company.

Whitecap is Here to help.

Ready to get started? We can help you build and optimize your most important sales tool – your website or application — to help you connect with your target audience.

Based in Toronto, Ontario, Whitecap Canada is a software developer, systems integrator and full service software management company. With extensive expertise translating business ideas into solutions that help companies serve their customers, employees and suppliers more effectively and efficiently.

Don't hesitate to ask us anything that might be on your mind. We're happy to answer your questions and are always here to help.

Send us a message at **info@whitecapcanada.com**, or call us at **1-855-393-9977**.

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