12
Website Design Decisions
Your Business or Organization Will Need to Make

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You may be on your first website. But more likely you're faced with redesigning a website that isn't functioning as well as it should. I see 12 vital decisions involved with developing a website, and I want to explain them with you in mind:

- You're the owner or marketing director of a small business and know that getting your website to pull its share of the load is vital for success. But your budget is severely limited!

- You've just been assigned the task of redoing your company's website. Congratulations, now you can be blamed if things don't work well. :-)

- You've volunteered to take on your church or organization website and make some sense out of it -- without offending the person who built it in the first place.

- This time around you've decided to outsource the job, but you have no idea of how to supervise a design company to make sure it does what you need. Good luck!

I want to help. When I built my first website in 1995 at the very beginning of the commercial Web, I didn't have a clue how to proceed. In those days there was no one to guide me. I've made every mistake you can think of -- some more than once, I hate to admit.

Since then I've built and assisted with dozens of online stores and hundreds of websites for all kinds of businesses and organizations, from mom and pops to major corporations and international organizations. I don't design websites for others these days, but I actively develop and maintain my own site.

There are twelve critical places in building a website where you *must* make the right decision, or you'll have to repeat this task again and again until you get it right. I won't be talking about how to write HTML; I want to help you with the mindset, the

basic approach. I want to take you by the hand and lead you through the critical decisions. The better you grasp these essential points, the better your website will work and the happier camper you'll be.

Okay, let's roll up our sleeves and get started. By the way, why don't you print out this document and then mark it up with your thoughts and ideas as you read. It's designed to serve as a worksheet to clarify your thinking and provide direction at various stages of the project. If you decide to outsource the project, you'll want to share a copy of your marked-up copy of this document with your website designer. Print it out.

1. Determine Your Website's Chief Purpose

When you begin a website, you must have your main purpose clearly in mind. I say this because it's easy to have conflicting purposes.

- If you're a website design firm, you may want to show off your high tech goodies with your client's site as the showpiece.

- If you're an employee stuck with this task, you may want to look good for your bosses and not do anything for which you can be blamed -- you've got to protect your backside.

- If you're a volunteer, you may just want an excuse to tinker and be praised for it.

- If you're a business owner, you probably care about the bottom line. You're wondering, How much this will cost? and Will it be worth it in the long run?

Dear friends, recognize your own needs -- they're legitimate. But to build an effective website, you've got to look at the business's or organization's needs and make *those* primary. From the *organization's* perspective, what must this website do in order to be successful?

Let's look at some common website purposes. Put an **X** next to all that apply.

- **Build your brand**. Create an online brochure that will help potential clients, customers, and partners learn about your company and look at it in a favorable light. You're trying to enhance your brand or organization image. I've heard people disparage this kind of website as "brochure-ware." But this is very legitimate for some kinds of companies, especially local businesses or organizations that aren't trying to conduct national or international commerce. You want people to know who you are, what you do, where to find you, and how to contact you.

- **Provide product information to drive local sales** of your products and services at dealer locations. Auto sites are a good example. Many manufacturers don't sell on their sites, but point people to retailers who carry their products.

- **Sell advertising.** A few sites are designed to sell advertising -- Yahoo!, Google, and other portal sites are examples. But these days, there's far too much advertising space and not nearly enough money to fill it all. Internet advertising is improving, but is still under-priced. You may be able to sell a little advertising if you're a portal site for an industry, or perhaps put some Google AdSense ads on your site. But these aren't big money-makers. Look at advertising sales as a hopeful bonus, not as a sure thing.

- **Sell products or services directly over the Internet.** You want to conduct e-commerce and sell to a national or international market. You'll have some

kind of ordering system for one or more products, or perhaps an extensive online catalog. You may offer an online service that can be delivered over the Internet or that can be initiated online.

- **Earn affiliate commissions for sales and leads** generated through links on your website. Savvy marketers are building microsites designed to generate search engine traffic for a particular hot product or service. When a visitor clicks on one of their links, he is referred to an e-commerce site, and, if a sale results, the affiliate gets a commission. Perhaps a form on your site generates leads or subscriptions for another company.

- **Provide customer service and support**. Websites are a great place for troubleshooting guides, FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions), technical information, etc. You can generate Return Merchandise Authorization (RMA) labels. You can provide multiple ways for your customers to contact you (see under Point #9 below).

- **Save money** by means of online efficiencies. Companies have used the Internet to save billions of dollars. Taking orders online with real-time credit card authorization saves paying call center operators and cuts entry errors. Online catalogs save lots in paper, printing, and distribution costs. Online FAQs and knowledge bases cut the number of customer service personnel you need. And I'm just scratching the surface here.

What's the design decision here? To be clear and focused about your site's objectives and purposes.

Worksheet. Now go back and put the numeral "1" next to the most important purpose, "2" for the next, and so on. Then in this space explain exactly what you want your website to achieve, in one or two sentences.

For more on this topic, see my article "Make Your Website Purposes Crystal Clear," *Web Marketing Today*, 5/1/1999 (www.wilsonweb.com/wmta/purpose-clear.htm).

2. Decide Whether to Outsource or Do It Yourself

After clarifying your purposes, you need to decide whether to outsource the design of your website or to do it yourself. Let me tell you my bias. For nearly all businesses and larger non-profits I recommend outsourcing initial website design, but be very sure that you bring site maintenance back in-house. (See Point #12 below.)

Website design done right is complex and requires a number of different skill sets that aren't commonly found in any one person, especially someone that doesn't do this for a living. Some of these skills include:

- **HTML savvy**. Good web design software can help. But the kind of HTML code produced by many WYSIWYG ("what you see is what you get") programs can be kludgy and hard to maintain. Fine-tuning your design requires you to get into the raw HTML code.

- **Graphic design, color experience and good artistic taste.** No software package bestows artistic taste on its user, but good taste is indispensable for an attractive site. Of course, graphic software expertise is required to produce attractive and clean photos and site graphics, optimized to the smallest possible file size for quick loading.

- **Website navigation design and implementation.** Helping visitors get where they need to go quickly and efficiently is difficult, especially on sites over 20 webpages or so. Good navigation design comes from experience, not from good software.

- **CGI and database programming**. Even smaller sites use a "contact us" form and often a site search program that require CGI program installation and configuration. Larger sites may need to be integrated with an online database, which is no job for the faint of heart.

- **JavaScript and Flash programming**. Functional websites are dramatically helped by Flash and JavaScript features such as animation, drop-down navigation menus, and small windows that open to answer a hyperlinked question. Automatic pop-up windows that encourage e-zine subscriptions can be effective, but can be annoying if you don't make them to turn off after one pop -- and these days are increasingly blocked by pop-up blockers.

- **Marketing and business experience**. An outside company doesn't really understand your business like you do. Make sure you communicate exactly what you need to achieve. The best website design firms understand how to build Web marketing into the site design to make it search engine friendly, to make the sales pages really sell, etc.

What does outsourcing cost? For a simple five or six page website, expect to pay $750 to $1,500. For a more complex site you may pay $3,000 to $10,000 and up.

For database-driven sites you'll need custom programming. Of course, sites designed for high traffic or for Internet-focused companies can cost much more.

If you have no money, it is possible to teach yourself website design. I did. Arm yourself by reading some website design books first and expect to make some mistakes.
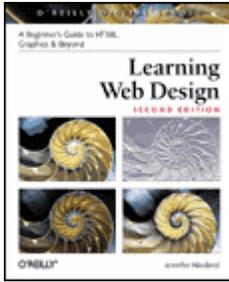
A couple of great beginners' books are *Learning Web Design: A Beginner's Guide to HTML, Graphics, and Beyond*, by Jennifer Niederst (Second edition; O'Reilly, 2003, ISBN 0596004842, paperback, 488 pages) and *Web Design for Dummies* by Lisa Lopuck (For Dummies, 2001, ISBN 0764508237, paperback, 360 pages). I find myself constantly referring to *Web Design in a Nutshell: A Desktop Quick Reference*, by Jennifer Niederst (O'Reilly, 2001, ISBN 0596001967, paperback, 618 pages). It's full of the nuts and bolts of website construction for more experienced developers who maintain and improve websites. You can also find lots of online help at WebReference.com, WebMonkey.com, and Builder.com. You'll need some good web design software such as Microsoft FrontPage or Macromedia DreamWeaver. Don't just forge ahead, though. Read and understand the design concepts first, then proceed step by step.

Another approach is to build a site using built-in templates and site-building wizards, such as those that come with Ken Evoy's Site Build It! Evoy's Site Build It! has the added advantage of a dozen tools to help increase your rank on the search engines. http://sales.sitesell.com/buildit/

Another approach is to hire a website design firm to design the website templates, navigation system, CGI and JavaScript programming, and perhaps do usability testing. They would set up the basic structure and you could build it out using their template and design. The old website design contract (www.wilsonweb.com/worksheet/pkg-con.htm) I developed when I was in the design business will give you an idea of some of the business issues that may come up when outsourcing. If you do outsource, be sure to conduct a "due diligence" investigation of the design firm by talking to previous clients, looking at their work, etc. Make sure they spell out in writing exactly what they agree to do for how much money, and provide a firm deadline by which their work will be completed. Partial payments should be made as specific milestones are reached and approved.

What's the design decision here? To decide whether to outsource none, part, or all of your website project.

Worksheet. Decide whether you will outsource __ none __part __all of your website project. What reasons motivate your decision?

Where you lack the necessary experience, what will you do?

3. Divide Your Website into Logical Sections

My first website had 100+ pages and I made the mistake of dumping all the webpages into a single directory. What a mess! I learned quickly that you need to organize your site both logically and with multiple directories, one for each section. Here's a typical small-site structure:
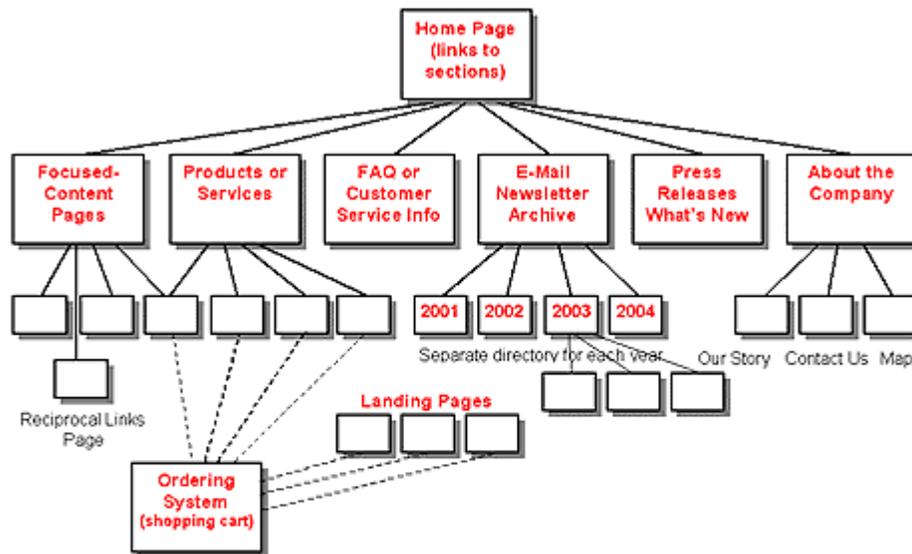
Copyright ©2003 by Dr. Ralph F. Wilson. All rights reserved. From an article, "12 Website Design Decisions Your Business or Organization Will Need to Make Correctly (or you'll have to do it all over within a year)," *Web Marketing Today*, 7/9/2003. http://www.wilsonweb.com/articles/12design.htm   This is only intended as an example. Your site design will be different — and that's okay. :-)

Click to enlarge and print in PDF format
http://www.wilsonweb.com/articles/images/site_structure.pdf

This site layout isn't meant to be prescriptive, but only suggestive. Get a blank piece of paper and begin to lay out what your site will look like, with similar functions grouped together.

Don't be afraid to create multiple subdirectories to keep your site organized. When you're setting up newsletter archives, for example, create a directory for each year of issues so a single directory doesn't get too cluttered. Remember, you're not designing for just the present moment, but for the growth your site may undergo over the next two or three years.

I set up my file structure with a /syspix subdirectory that contains the system graphics which appear on nearly every page of the site. I also use an /images subdirectory under each major section of the website to contain the graphics used in that particular section. You may know where everything goes right now, but what happens when you try to make sense of it a year or two from now? Organize!

Your home page should provide a statement of exactly what your company or organization does. Preparing a Unique Selling Proposition (USP) for your company is a great way to begin. I'm amazed at how many websites don't really tell me what

they do. I have to nose around trying to figure it out. That's stupid! State precisely what you do, and then provide links to the rest of your site so your visitor can learn more. For more information, see my article "Just Who Are You Anyway? Developing a USP," *Web Marketing Today*, 3/1/2000 (www.wilsonweb.com/wmt5/plan-usp.htm).

My site structure diagram includes product pages, landing pages, and an ordering system. More on those in Point #10 below. The focused content and reciprocal linking pages are designed to boost your search engine ranking, and are described in Point #8 below.

In your "About the Company" section be sure to tell your organization's story. Big companies spend millions to build confidence through brand name familiarity. Small businesses tell their story, often illustrated with photos, to help visitors understand and trust them. If you have a passion about what you do, tell your visitors about it in this section! Here's where a local business or organization will include a map and driving directions to help people find it. I'll talk about the importance of the "Contact Us" form in Point #9 below.

What's the design decision here? To structure your site and break up your webpages into logical directories and subdirectories to avoid confusion later.

Worksheet. What will be the names of the directories and subdirectories in your site? (Better yet, write this out on a full sheet of paper.)

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4. Develop a Site Navigation System

Now that you've laid out your website, you can see how important a good navigation system is. One of the chief complaints that visitors have is that they can't find the content they're looking for. The larger your site, the more important redundant navigation systems are -- more systems than you think you might need. Here are some of the basic systems and a few you might not have thought of:

- **Left-side menu** lists the various sections of your site, and perhaps some of the subsections, too.

- **Tabs** near the top of the webpage help the visitor quickly see the most important sections of your site. This facilitates browsing.

- **Search** the site or the product database. Larger sites need a search feature so visitors don't get lost.

- **10 most common gifts**, etc.

- **View today's specials** or recent news releases.

- **Bottom links** provide hypertext links to all the sectional pages.

- **Site map** shows the structure and has links to every page (or sectional page).

Except for the very smallest five- or six-page sites, I encourage you to implement two or more of these systems. Over-kill, that's the ticket. What may be obvious to you and your designer after looking at the site for weeks may not be obvious at all to your visitor. Each separate navigation system gives her another opportunity to find what she's looking for.

If you're a do-it-yourselfer, consider using a free search engine such as Atomz Express Search (www.atomz.com/applications/search/trial.htm) or FreeFind (www.freefind.com) for your search function. Another approach is to use Google Free web search with site search (www.google.com/searchcode.html).

Some websites are "button happy." They have graphic buttons down the left side of the page and across the top. They may look nice, but there's a big cost in download time. There's a strong trend on high traffic sites toward text menus made with HTML characters, not GIF images. Look at a text menu you admire and study the HTML by viewing the source. Text is good; buttons are bad -- especially when overdone. Got it?

Finally, I'd like to say a word about "frames," a kind of HTML menu that lists page names in a window on the left side that scrolls up and down independently of the content window on the right. Website designers used to love them, until they discovered that they cripple a website's marketing potential. Insist that your site developer not use frames! More on this in Point #7 below. Instead of using frames, set up your navigation system with Server Side Includes (SSIs), described in Point

#6 below. If you have a complex site, I recommend that you employ a professional website designer to set up your navigation system -- even if you do all the rest. Leverage professional experience to help your customers find what they're looking for.

You can find more information in my article, "Navigation Systems for Business Websites," *Web Marketing Today*, 8/31/2000 (www.wilsonweb.com/articles/navigation.htm).

What's the design decision here? To make clear, redundant navigation a priority -- for your customers' sake.


Worksheet. Put an **X** next to the types of navigation system you plan to use from the list above. Why are you choosing these? What is your rationale?

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5. Give Your Website an Attractive 'Look and Feel'

Why should a website look good? Why should it look professional? Because like the sign hanging over a store in the strip mall, your website reflects upon you and your business. If the sign's lettering looks crude and homemade, people won't say, "The thrifty shopkeeper is trying to save money by making his own sign." They'll say, "How tacky! If this is how the sign looks, then the products and services can't be of very high quality either!"

You owe it to yourself to make your website look top-notch. To succeed, you'll need some artistic flair, or perhaps you should hire a graphic designer's talents for the basic design and site graphics.

I'd like you to look with me at IBM's homepage. It is a well-designed page, but it isn't "graphics heavy" and doesn't take a long time to download.
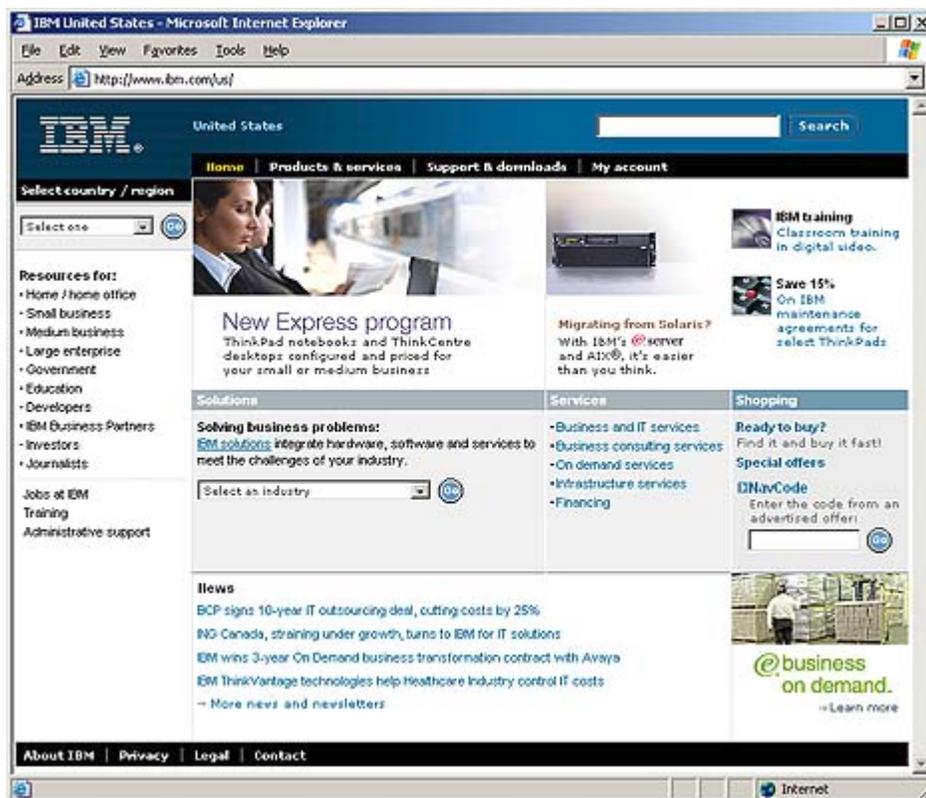
IBM's US homepage as of 8-Jul 2003.
Click to enlarge to a printable PDF document
http://www.wilsonweb.com/articles/images/ibm_homepage030708.pdf

I won't be exhaustive, but I want you to notice:

- The site is **clean and understated**, not gaudy or in-your-face. Few colors with lots of white space contribute to this light, airy feeling.

- The page is designed with **colored cells of HTML tables** that take practically no download time. Most of the parts that are blue, black, dark grey, and light gray are table cells.

- **Graphics are few**. The largest is a gif image 25K in size. Other gif images are small, with some reusable "go" and "search" buttons.

- The **left-side menu is text**.

- The **navigation system** consists of: (1) left-side menu, (2) site search in the top right corner, (3) four major categories in the black bar at the top, (4) solutions (browse by industry), services, and shopping in the gray blocks, (5) recent news releases, (6) selected popular products highlighted with graphics, (7) company-oriented menu in a black bar in the bottom left corner.

- **Photographs** contribute to the classy, professional look. Photos can be very effective on business websites.

I could take you to many websites, but you can do that yourself. Become a student of how to create a simple, clean business look. It takes a lot of skill to design a site this well and with this kind of restraint.

Let me tell you a secret. Some graphic designers like to build sites with lots of graphics. They have fast LAN or DSL connections and have no idea how long their sites take to download on a 56K modem. Try to keep your homepage to 60K maximum, counting the file sizes of all the graphics and the HTML. (It's a hard, but an important exercise.) Resist a designer's yen to show off his skills. Quick loading -- that's important.

There's no way I can educate you on complementary colors, warm and cold colors, heavy and light colors, etc. But bear in mind that everything you do has some effect on your visitor's perceptions of your company, her state of mind, and her emotional response.

One of your best website investments will be in a few excellent, royalty-free stock photos. Well composed photos add a touch of class to your webpages. They provide a visual center of interest in an otherwise plain webpage. They add spice and color. You don't want just dull pictures of business people in suits. To create a sense of energy and maximum effort, you might use a theme of photos from competitive sports, for example. Use your imagination. For high quality photos you can license and use on your website for $35 to $60 each, look at PhotoDisc (Getty Images, www.photodisc.com). I subscribe to ClipArt.com (www.wilsonweb.com/afd/clipart.htm) and have access to hundreds of thousands of photos (some great, many good). I can use anything I can download for $14.95 a week. Such a deal!

What's the design decision here? To develop a quality, professional appearance for the website that represents your organization.

Worksheet. In three sentences, how do you plan to achieve the professional look and feel that your website needs?

6. Build Basic Webpage Templates

Commercial websites are built from templates. You or your designer will create a template that constructs each part of a typical webpage, with a "hole" in the center for the unique page content. This takes many hours to build from scratch, but it's worth it. Now you can create page after page from the template. For each webpage you'll insert a page title, meta tag content (see Point #7 below), a headline, and the text content, each in its appropriate spot. Have fun!

But let me take this a step further. Take a look at the sample webpage from my site. I've simplified it here, but the article content is surrounded by four sections, each of which is shown when a web browser comes to the webpage:

- **top.ssi** -- inserts the masthead graphic, a banner ad, and some of the "tabs" navigation system at the top of the page. This is a separate file, called "top.ssi" that is inserted at the top.

- **menu.ssi** -- inserts the complex left-side menu plus a database search feature.

- **bottom.ssi** -- inserts a subscription form for my newsletter, plus more navigation links, copyright and trademark information.

- **right.ssi** -- inserts cover shots of my books, plus links to purchase my e-books and affiliate links to products and services in the field of web marketing and e-commerce.

Each of these files is called a Server Side Include (SSI) file. On the webpage a single line of code calls one of these files and places it where it belongs on the page. Here's what it the code looks like:

```
<!--#include virtual="/ssi/top.ssi"-->
```

The beauty of this kind of modular system is that a site built with SSIs can be modified or completely altered by just changing one of the SSI files and uploading it to the server. Now *all* the webpages in the entire system reflect the change. When I discovered how to do this it cut my maintenance time dramatically. Yes, it takes a learning curve to make it work, but it's well worth the time you spend! For more information see my article "Server Side Includes (SSIs) and Navigation Systems," *Web Marketing Today*, 8/1/1998 (www.wilsonweb.com/articles/ssi.htm).

It is possible, of course, to use a template for your pages that doesn't employ SSIs. But if you anticipate a site that could grow to more that 8 to 10 pages, you're much better off building your site with SSIs. If your designer doesn't know how to use SSIs, find another designer.

Modern websites control the font sizes and colors using Cascading Style Sheets (CSS). When you change the font size on a single master CSS file, it changes the fonts and colors in *all* your webpages. Cool! Make sure your website designer builds webpages using a single CSS file, since it saves maintenance costs in the long run.

The design decisions that you need to consider here are many, since they involve every detail of the look and feel of your basic template. Hopefully, you'll decide to employ both Server Side Includes (SSIs) and Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) that make your entire site easy to modify and maintain. Also consider features available with XHTML.

## 7. Construct Your Site to Be Search Engine Friendly

With a little practice, anyone can build a webpage. But a webpage that search engines love to visit and index -- vital if you expect your site to get traffic -- that's another story. So many, many business websites don't have a clue how to do this. Let me mention two important aspects of building a search engine friendly site:

A. Make Each Webpage a Search Engine Siren

In Greek mythology, as you know, partly-human female creatures called Sirens lured mariners with their singing. Your webpages ought to entice search engine spiders or robots to index your site. Each webpage you construct needs to contain the following elements. Note the careful placement of keywords, the search words people would use to find this particular webpage.

- **Title** -- provocative and descriptive, containing the most important keywords from that webpage, no more than 80 characters. This is what shows up hyperlinked in search engine results, so make people want to click on it.

- **Meta tags** -- The description meta tag should include one or two sentences (up to about 250 characters) describing the contents of this particular webpage. Work into the sentence the most important keywords and keyphrases that occur on this page. Some search engines will display your description. I still include a meta keywords tag, since Yahoo currently uses it for indexing, though Google doesn't.

- **Headlines** -- H1, H2, H3 in HTML parlance. Your headline and subheadings should include your important keyword at least once.

- **Body text** -- The first paragraph of the content of your webpage article or text should contain the main keywords for that page.

- **Hyperlink text and filenames** -- Search engines believe that the words contained in hyperlinks on your webpage (such as widget) are important, and thus rank them higher. If the filenames contained in the hyperlink URLs contain important keywords (such as `widget.html` for the filename of your widget order page), so much the better.

Don't emphasize the same keywords on every page. Let the actual content on that page dictate what keywords should stand out. Your goal is not to trick the search engines in some kind of bait-and-switch scam, but to help the search engines recognize and index appropriately the actual content of your webpages. Construct every webpage with search engines in mind and it'll help your rankings. Of course, search engine rankings are heavily influenced by incoming links to your site, but constructing your webpages with an eye to search engines is very important, too.
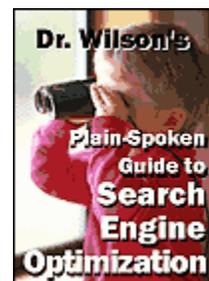
You'll find lots more about this in my 42-page book *Dr. Wilson's Plain-Spoken Guide to Search Engine Optimization* (www.wilsonweb.com/ebooks/seo.htm)

B. Search Engine Savvy Navigation Systems

Navigation systems are built to help actual humans find their way around your website. But these navigation systems had better be designed carefully or the search engines will throw up their hands in disgust, with the result that actual humans will never *get* to your website. Search engines need a chain of hypertext links -- starting at your homepage -- that will take them, page by page, to every webpage in your entire site. But let me explain three common navigation design problems that can disrupt search engine indexing of your site:

1. **Frames** (mentioned in Point #4 above) produce a navigation system where the menu on the left scrolls independently of the page content on the right. Unfortunately, frames can wreak havoc with search engines. (a) Unless you are careful to include <NOFRAMES> tags, search engines may not be able to find the content pages. (b) Even if search engines *do* find your content pages, these pages can show up in response to a search engine query all by themselves, without the navigation system and links necessary for a visitor to find the rest of your website. Don't use frames. If your current site has frames, make plans to rebuild the site without them. A menu constructed from SSIs (mentioned in Point #6 above) is just as easy to maintain -- even easier, once you learn how to do it.

2. **JavaScript and Flash** are programming languages that can make very classy, animated menu systems. For example, a menu item might have a drop-down sub-menu that will wow your visitors (you hope). The problem is that if JavaScript and Flash systems replace plain hyperlinks, the search engine may not be able to find the underlying pages. Most search engines have posters on their walls saying, "I don't do Flash." Stubborn creatures, these search engines. One solution: retain your fancy menus, but include hypertext links at the bottom of the page to your sectional pages, with links on your sectional pages to all the subpages in that section. You can also submit a site map webpage to the search engines that contains a link to every page on your site.

3. **Dynamically generated webpages**, created "on the fly" from a database, are more difficult for search engines to index, since these webpages don't exist in real time. They appear when a visitor clicks on a link. Then the database whirrs and spits out a transient webpage for that visitor and that visitor alone. Database-driven content management systems are the only way to keep your sanity if your site contains thousands of webpages, but they cause search engine problems.

   A question mark or a long session ID string can be a red flag to search engines. Many will stop and throw a hissy fit -- or perhaps index more slowly and less comprehensively. A bunch of over-sensitive search engine divas?

Yes. But it can happen. Don't use content or catalog management software that produces long URLs if you can help it. You can get around this in three ways: (1) URL rewriting at the server configuration level, (2) building a set of focused content pages (see Point #8 below), or (3) paid inclusion submission to search engines. Contact me for referral to a search engine optimization firm that specializes in dynamically-generated sites.

What are the design decisions regarding search engines? A commitment to design (a) **each webpage** and (b) **the site navigation system** with search engines in mind. This is a marketing, not a techie priority, so you may have to insist that your website designers work with search engines on their minds.

Worksheet. How will you change any design problems with your existing website that make it difficult for search engines to spider the site?

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8. Write and Fine-tune Focused Content Pages

If you've ever been in charge of building your company's website from scratch, you've learned that one of the most time-consuming tasks is to write the copy or words that appear on the website. It's plain old hard work. It's easier to build the second or third version of your website, since the writing is already done.

Or is it?

One of the keys to generating search engine traffic is to get your site into the top 5 or 10 positions on the search engines for the keywords and keyphrases that matter to your business. It's often hard to get your home page to score high for specific keywords or keyphrases, since it is the most general entrance to your entire website content. Your best strategy is to write a series of focused content pages, each of which features a particular topic and keyword or keyphrase. These pages aren't general, but very specific.

Once you've written your first draft, test the webpage against the Page Critic feature in WebPosition Gold (www.wilsonweb.com/afd/webposition.htm), an excellent search engine optimization software tool that I use and recommend. Page Critic's detailed analysis will guide you through the process of tweaking your webpage wording, title, meta tags, headlines, alt tags, etc., so that the page has a better chance of ranking high on the search engines.

For competitive words, you can't rank high on Google and other search engines without lots of incoming links, so work on linking strategies, too, such as reciprocal linking with complementary sites. (See my article with Eric Ward, "Linking Strategies that Improve Traffic to Your Site," *Web Marketing Today*, 4/2/2003, www.wilsonweb.com/wmt8/linking_ward.htm). Nevertheless, these focused content pages should be an integral part of your website strategy to boost rankings.

Note: The doorway or gateway pages recommended in years past can be penalized by search engines as duplicate content. I recommend that you dismantle them and play by the new rules of, "Nice search engine. Good boy. Don't bite."

The design decisions? A functional website must generate traffic, so you must intentionally include focused-content webpages in your site to pull that traffic to you.

Worksheet: What keywords and keyphrases are worth writing focus-content webpages around? Which words are key to driving the traffic we need? List at least six.

9. Incorporate Customer Communication Systems

Websites are two-way, interactive communication systems. You communicate your company's marketing message to potential customers and make it easy for them to reciprocate by communicating with you. The better the communication, the more trust increases, and customers feel comfortable to do business with you.

Of course, on your contact page, include full contact information -- name, address, phone number, etc. I'm amazed at the number of sites that don't include any contact information, but still expect people to do business with them. Full contact information builds trust -- even if your customers never need to use it.

One key communication tool is the "Contact Us" response form. Such a form includes fields that ask for your visitor's name, contact information and question or comment. When the form is submitted, it sends an immediate e-mail to you as well as an e-mail assuring your customer that you'll be reading the message and responding soon. And you need to keep your word. Respond to your customers' e-mail promptly!

The poor man's response method is a mailto link (such as username@domain.com) that allows the customer to use his own e-mail program to send you an e-mail message. The problem with this approach is that you often don't get vital contact information from the customer, such as his phone number. With e-mail that comes from a form, you can easily filter it via the subject line into the appropriate folder for immediate viewing. E-mail that comes through a general e-mail address, on the other hand, easily becomes confused with spam and could be overlooked.

One of the most popular form-to-email programs, Matt Wright's FormMail ver. 1.92 (www.scriptarchive.com/formmail.html), was updated on April 19, 2002 to plug some serious security holes. It is an excellent tool -- and free, also.

However, there are other ways you can make it easy for customers to communicate with you. These include

- **Instant text chat systems** such as LivePerson (www.liveperson.com).

- **Instant Messaging (IM) systems** are in widespread use by your customers. Why not list all your usernames and numbers on your site for quick response to customer questions?

For more information see "Instant Customer Service to Boost Sales," *Web Commerce Today*, 5/15/2003 (www.wilsonweb.com/wct6/issue70.htm), written for my paid subscribers.

One excellent way to save time for yourself and your customers is to develop a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page. It'll cut down on your customers' need to contact you. See my article "The FAQ Answer to 80% of E-Mail Overload," *Web Marketing Today*, 5/1/1998 (www.wilsonweb.com/articles/faq.htm).

Excellent customer service is the basis of *any* successful business -- on or off the Internet.

The design decision here is to incorporate multiple ways for your customer to contact you.

Worksheet. What communication systems have you built into your site? Which other ones would be valuable to your customers -- and help boost your sales?

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10. Create and Test Effective Sales Pages

Every business site -- and many organization sites -- have what Ken Evoy, in his landmark e-book *Make Your Site Sell!* (http://sales.sitesell.com/myss), calls a Most Wanted Response (MWR). Your Most Wanted Response is probably one of the chief purposes you listed under Point #1 (above). For many business sites, the purpose is (1) to sell a product, (2) to have the visitor go through an affiliate link to buy a product on another site, or (3) to generate contact information for a future lead or follow-up. For organizations, success may be measured in memberships or subscriptions. Whatever your MWR, you must work to optimize responses.

Good sales pages result in a high ratio of sales to visitors -- called the "conversion rate." A good site might have a conversion rate of 3% to 5%, some higher and many lower. Over the past few years, marketers have developed the art of increasing the conversion rate. This is especially important when you are purchasing Pay Per Click (PPC) ads to drive traffic to your site. Your profit is closely related to (a) the cost of the click and (b) the conversion rate of the "landing page," that is, the sales page to which you direct interested shoppers. I discuss how to make effective landing pages in my brief e-book *How to Develop a Landing Page that Closes the Sale* (e-book or printed book, 2005, 28 pages, www.wilsonweb.com/ebooks/landing.htm). For stores that sell many products, the techniques to boost conversion rates are similar, but with some variations, as I outline in my book *12 Ways to Give Your Webstore a Sales Boost* (e-book, 2000, 71 pages, www.wilsonweb.com/ebooks/sales-boost.htm). If you need an ordering system, see *The Shopping Cart Report 2004* (e-book, 2004, 766 pages, www.wilsonweb.com/ebooks/carts.htm).

To scientifically and systematically increase your conversion rate to the maximum, you must carefully track sales percentages for each product your sell. Then make incremental changes to the landing page or the order system and see if the conversion rate rises or falls. Over a period of careful study and change, you'll maximize your sales. To learn just how to do this with a review of testing tools, see my book *How to Optimize Your Landing Pages Scientifically* (www.wilsonweb.com/ebooks/splittest.htm).

Here again are the steps you'll go through:

1. Set up an ordering system (e-commerce capability)

2. Create a landing page

3. Boost sales on your landing page by testing

For a great deal of information about selling products and services online, subscribe to my e-mail newsletter *Web Marketing Today Premium Edition* (www.wilsonweb.com/wct/) or dip into the Web Marketing Info Center (www.wilsonweb.com/cat/), with links to 13,000+ articles and resources.

What's the design decision here? To commit yourself to seriously working to increase the response rate.

> **Worksheet**: What e-commerce ordering system will you use? For which products or services should you try to increase your conversion rate. Which pages of your website should be constructed as landing pages?

11. Conduct Usability Trials and Incorporate Changes

We've almost finished our survey of 12 Website Design Decisions. But before you quit, you need to test your site thoroughly. All newly constructed websites contain unseen glitches -- especially those created by inexperienced developers.

Here's how to conduct your first few usability trials. Ask to meet with a friend who is an Internet novice. Seat him in front of a computer, stand near him, and direct him to your site. Tell him that you'd like him to talk out loud to you about what he is thinking and the questions that occur to him as he pokes around your site. Explain to him that you won't be able to answer any questions at this time, but you want to hear them just the same. Now watch and take copious notes. Observe what confuses him. See where he gets hung up. Listen to his questions.

After 10 or 15 minutes of this humbling exercise, you'll detect plenty of small changes to make. You'll also learn how effective your navigation system is. If you have built your site with SSIs, as recommend in Point #6 above, navigation system changes will require you to modify only one or two of the boilerplate SSI files. Upload the changes and the whole site will be easier to navigate.

To discover 85% of the usability problems on your site, repeat the usability exercise a total of five times, each time, of course, with a different person who can look at your site through completely new eyes. For more information on website usability, consult Dr. Jakob Nielsen's UseIt.com site (www.useit.com) and subscribe to his free AlertBox e-zine.

What's the design decision here? Submit your site to simple usability testing with five subjects. Your site will be much better as a result.

> **Worksheet**. List your five recruits to be usability testers for your site when you get near completion of your project.

12. Plan to Maintain Your Site for the Long Haul

Building a site for the first time is exciting. Maintaining it for the next two or three years can be extremely frustrating unless you've set it up with maintenance in mind. By maintenance I mean:

- Changing the content of existing information, such as upcoming events, new industry directions, new personnel, etc. Life isn't static. Websites shouldn't be either.

- Adding new webpages, such as archiving copies of your newsletters, adding new products and services.

- Changing the content of your home page so that your site looks active and up-to-date.

I strongly recommend that someone in your own organization learns how to make the everyday website changes that an active organization requires. Community colleges and adult education curricula often offer training in webpage design and HTML. A person in your business can also learn a great deal by studying the books recommended in Point #2 above.

Yes, you want to have a website designer available to back you up on occasions when the change needed is beyond your person's abilities. But webpage maintenance is something you definitely want to keep in-house, like word-processing and desktop publishing. Learn how! Otherwise, changes aren't likely to happen in a timely manner, and you may put off requesting changes that should take place immediately.

If your business is too small to have an in-house person with HTML skill, there's another approach. It is possible to insert codes into your webpages that can allow sections of the pages to be updated easily from a web browser without messing up the overall design. Edit.com Website Maintenance Service (www.wilsonweb.com/afd/edit_com.htm) provides you with this capability at very modest rates. If you have an existing site, they can fix it so you can edit it yourself in the future. Now your CEO can write a weekly column -- all by herself! You can update key information on any number of webpages from your web browser, all with a username and password. Suggest this to your website designer who is tearing out his hair trying to teach you website maintenance.

What's the design decision? Make sure that you plan for site maintenance rather than let it fall through the cracks.

Worksheet. How will you keep the website up-to-date? Who in your organization knows or can learn HTML? How often should this person be assigned to make necessary changes?

That's it -- the 12 crucial design decisions. Of course, there's much more to a website than what I've mentioned. But this will get you started in the right direction and get you asking the right questions.

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The Next Step -- Marketing Your Site

A website without marketing is like a candy shop on a dead-end street. You've got to let them know you're there. Your website designer will probably submit your home page to the search engines, but that's only scratching the surface.

That's where I come in. I don't do the marketing for you. But let me describe some learning tools I offer that will help you understand how to effectively market your site.

Planning Your Internet Marketing Strategy, by Ralph F. Wilson (John Wiley & Sons, 2002, ISBN 0471441090, trade paperback, 256 pages). A no-hype guide to help you decide whether your business can succeed online, and, if so, how to plan a marketing strategy that can propel it forward. This is a concepts, planning book -- not a methods handbook. Available from Amazon.com.

The E-Mail Marketing Handbook (2nd Edition) by Ralph F. Wilson (e-book, 2005, 875 pages). This book contains a tremendous amount of information on how to market via e-mail -- newsletters, listserver mailing programs, how to send out e-mail promotions without spamming, etc. (www.wilsonweb.com/ebooks/handbook.htm)

The Internet Marketing Best Practices Briefing, live with Dr. Ralph F. Wilson, provides six-and-half jam-packed hours of instruction designed to take participants from an elementary to an intermediate level of understanding Internet marketing. If you need an honest, comprehensive, one-day seminar to help put it all in perspective for you, this is it. Offered in-person in selected cities. (www.wilsonweb.com/seminar/)

Research Guide to Online Niche-Finding. This 49-page book leads you through the steps necessary to discover a potentially profitable online business niche, consider the competition, and develop a unique approach that will bring traffic and revenue. We examine the 5 principles of research, examine the various formulas used to spot potential winners, consider the strengths and weaknesses of the existing research software, briefly survey 24 keyword, PPC, and niche-finding research software programs, and provide more in-depth reviews of WorldWide Brands Research Wizard, P.I.P.E. and the *Online Research Guide to Picking Products that Sell*.

The 766-page **Shopping Cart Report**, revised in January 2004, is the most comprehensive purchasing guide to e-commerce software ever published. It provides a basic overview of carts and my recommendations of 36 particular carts. There's a shopping guide for 12 different cart applications. I provide a directory to 225 shopping cart programs, with detailed information on 50 of the top vendors.

10 Steps to E-Business on a Shoestring, by Ralph F. Wilson (e-book, 2002, 80 pages). Tells you how to get started online at the very least expense.

Lots of proven money-saving tips (www.wilsonweb.com/ebooks/shoestring.htm).

My 24-page **"How to Develop a Landing Page that Closes the Sale"** explains how to maximize the effect of your advertising, by pointing to a specific "landing page" that leads the shopper to decide to complete the transaction. This short 24-page book will help you increase your conversion rate substantially.

 How to Promote Your Local Business on the Internet. This 44-page book is designed for local business owners and marketing directors, as well as professionals who serve them -- web designers and marketing consultants. While not repeating all the Internet marketing basics, it focuses on the elements that can make local business marketing a success, localized search engine optimization, Yellow Page ads, awareness of local portals, use of local PPC options and geotargeting at Google AdWords and Yahoo Local, e-mail newsletters, etc.

Ken Evoy's Site Build It! is a system that provides for hosting as well as a number of tools to help you do the marketing necessary to move your site up in the search engine rankings. Highly recommended. (www.wilsonweb.com/afd/sitebuildit.htm)

Before you leave, be sure you've signed up to receive my free e-mail newsletter, *Web Marketing Today Free Edition* (www.wilsonweb.com/wmt/).

About the Author

Dr. Ralph F. Wilson is widely recognized as one of the top international authorities in the area of Internet marketing. **Business Week** called his popular WilsonWeb.com website: "bar none the best e-commerce resource out there." **Business 2.0** profiled him as one of the savvy dot-com survivors. **The New York Times** named Dr. Wilson "among the best-known Internet Marketing publishers and consultants who preach the responsible use of e-mail for marketing."

Dr. Ralph F. Wilson
E-Business Expert

He is the founding editor of *Web Marketing Today®*, the grandfather of the Internet marketing e-zines, published continuously since 1995. His *Web Marketing Today Premier Edition* is considered one of the top sources in the industry for in-depth content.

He is a winner of the **Tenagra Award for Internet Marketing Excellence** and the author of hundreds of articles and numerous books, including ***Planning Your Internet Marketing Strategy*** (John Wiley & Sons, 2002), ***The E-Mail Marketing Handbook*** (2005), and ***The Shopping Cart Report*** (2004).
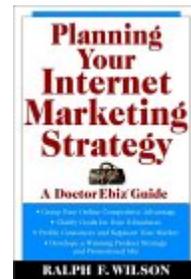
Dr. Wilson speaks widely in the US and abroad. His one-day seminars, such as the **Internet Marketing Best Practices Briefing**, have been held on university campuses all over the US. He holds three earned academic degrees and lives with his wife in Loomis, California.