THE BUSINESS OWNER'S GUIDE TO

Website Development

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WHITE PAPER
A guide written independently to help you understand issues,
solve problems, and make decisions.

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INTRODUCTION

Let me start by saying, I am not a web developer. I, along with my team at Gravity Marketing have served as strategist, creative director, and project manager on dozens of websites for small to mid-sized business-to-business (B2B) companies. We are proven marketing professionals who understand the need for a website to achieve organizational goals, fuel sales opportunities, be adaptable, launch in a timely fashion and be easily administered and measured. Sounds simple, right? Actually, for many B2B companies, it's not.

You've most likely heard your share of website project nightmares. A three-month timeline spiraling into 12 months. A tight but reasonable budget escalating upwards of six figures. Design and content cannibalizing all other marketing activities. Buyer's remorse when a company is left with a complicated website only the developer can update.

Websites don't have to be a necessary evil. In fact, all of the above nightmare scenarios could have been avoided with a good project manager and some website savvy.

This guide will arm business owners and marketing executives with the information needed to confidently proceed with a website development project, including:

- Defining project scope and goals
- Time and resource management
- Roles, responsibilities, and expectations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A website developer puts all strategy, creative and project management on the customer's plate. If you don't have a marketing manager who is experienced in website design, then that onus is on you. Get a handle on the ins and outs of the website development process by researching best practices and design trends, know the common mistakes, snafus, and project derailments, and most importantly, take the time to understand website industry speak. Or, reach out to consultants like Gravity Marketing who can use their knowledge and experience in web design and project management to streamline the process, reduce cost and headaches, and produce a website that accomplishes strategic goals for you.

WEBSITE PROJECT PRIMER

Before you start thinking about the finished product, take stock of the items the budget will need to cover.

Components of a website project

There are four components of a website development project that should be considered from the outset: the strategy, the creative, the coding, and the content. Envision your website team. Do you have experts for each of these components?

STRATEGY drives the direction, content, and purpose of the website.

CREATIVE fulfills that vision through the site's look and feel, organization, and branding.

CODING brings strategy and creative together in a functioning user experience.

CONTENT moves visitors through the first steps of the buying process and naturally boosts search engine optimization.

Strategic, creative, and content experts can be found in-house on your marketing team or at a firm or agency partner. The web developer provides the coding expertise.

Technical basics

Websites are created using HTML code, either from scratch (completely custom) or by using a content management system (CMS) such as Drupal, Joomla, WordPress, Sharepoint or Sitecore. Picking a platform is just the foundation the site will be built on. Developers will need to create custom code to develop the site you are envisioning.

All website data, from templates and coding to content, is saved on an internal server. This server is owned and operated by the company, or by a hosting provider, where the company pays a monthly fee to maintain the site and its data. You'll also need a web address, which can be selected and purchased through domain name registrars such as GoDaddy, Network Solutions or 1&1.

Types of developers

Each web development company offers a unique specialty, and are difficult to compare apples to apples. They do, however, have their own distinct skill sets and ideal clients or website projects. The most effective way to narrow down the type of company you'd work best with is to write down your website strategy, purpose, end-user functionality, and budget. The table below can help create a general picture of the type of developer you'll want to work with. Keep in mind the programming cost would only cover the coding component of website development. So if you don't have in-house capabilities for strategy, creative and content, you'll need to budget for those components in addition to the programming cost.

	LOW END	MID-LOW END	MID-HIGH END	HIGH END
		RECOMMENDED		
SIZE	Sole proprietor	6-12 programmers	6-12 programmers	12+ programmers
PLATFORM	Free CMS (WordPress, Joomla, Drupal)	Custom CMS	Off-shelf (free or paid) CMS or e-commerce platform	Custom, complex CMS or e-commerce platform
PROGRAMMING COST	$2,000-$10,000	$5,000 to $20,000	$10,000-$30,000	$30,000-$100,000
CONTRACT LENGTH	Short-term – duration of build	Mid-term – duration of build, plus major updates	Long-term – duration of build, plus maintenance	Long-term – duration of build, plus maintenance

For the sake of this guide, we recommend working with the mid-low end and mid-high end developers. The high end developers will want to create something too sophisticated for your needs. The low end developers notoriously disappear after the project and if they don't, they may not have the time to address your needs in an efficient manner after the project is complete.

PROJECT PHASES, BEST PRACTICES, AND COMMON MISTAKES

Now that you have the basic knowledge of website development, you are ready to begin planning, selecting a developer partner, creating, and launching your new website. All projects will hit unexpected roadblocks, but your budget and timeline from here on out will depend on how well your project is managed, and how effectively all parties involved can communicate.

Gravity Marketing consults with both clients and web developers throughout website development projects to ensure they run smoothly. Below are best practices and common mistakes we have collected over the dozens of websites we have helped build.

PHASE	BEST PRACTICES TO EMPLOY	COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID
PLANNING	**Define your strategy.** Layout how you would like the website to walk visitors through the first few stages of the buying process, with the key of creating more frequent, meaningful interaction across all audiences. • At the end of the day, what do you want the website to do? • How will this site help you gain credibility? • Will you replace an existing site? **Describe your target audience.** In addition to your ideal customer, you will need to cater content to audiences in each stage of the buying process: • Early prospects who will find your site through a search engine. • Leads who might want information to help them consider you as a solution. • Existing customers looking for resources and company updates. **Outline the purpose and drivers of the new site.** Solidifying the purpose of the site will help focus everyone involved in the project through its duration. It should be a given that the site's purpose is to position your company as the knowledge leader in your market or industry. But, also consider: • How will the site impact the sales process? • How will it generate leads? • Will it help you qualify leads? • How will it demonstrate that you are a better choice than your competition? **List challenges of your current website.** Understanding what isn't working for you now – whether it is on the front end or the back end, will help you avoid the same issues in the future.	**Not knowing what you are buying.** When you develop a website, you are buying a version of something that was built at a point in time for your use. Just like Microsoft Office, new versions of the platform will be released and your site will eventually be considered out of date. **Trying to salvage an existing website.** At the rate technology is evolving, websites have a five-year life expectancy. It will cost much more to build a new website on an old platform than to build a new one from scratch. **Thinking you need a new website at all.** If your website is less than five years old, you may just need a content overhaul. Work with strategic and creative advisors to determine if you can make updates without the need for coding. **Misalignment with business goals.** With a five-year life expectancy in mind, what future site updates can you anticipate based on expected business growth, product introductions, audiences you want to reach, or site functionality needs?

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REQUESTS FOR PROPOSALS (RFP)	**Communicate your goals.** When meeting with potential web development partners, the clearer the picture you can give of what you want to achieve and how you think you can achieve it, the better. This will help you evaluate and compare them against each other to weed out the developers incapable of delivering the level of complexity you are looking for. **Describe the user experience.** The way a website functions can drastically impact user experience, budget, and timeline. So it is critical that the web developers know up front how you would like users to interact with the site, for example, will they: • Search and download PDFs? • Create an account or fill out forms? • Search listings? Post listings? • Conduct monetary transactions? **Sketch out a wireframe of how you want the website to work.** We know you aren't an expert at website design – that's why you want to hire one. However, drawing a picture can make all the difference when discussing something visual. It also can be a helpful baseline during the evaluation process.	**Issuing an RFP without a clear vision or budget.** Web developers will figure out a way to build anything you want them to. To save time, money and effort, it should be a best practice to have a clear idea of what you want before sitting down with a potential web partner. **Skipping due diligence on CMS selection.** You need to take the time to evaluate the CMS you are choosing, or your web developer is recommending. Make sure you understand the level of modifications you can make on a regular basis without the need for developer intervention. **Assuming developers will engage in strategy.** A developer's job is to ask you what you want and then do it. It is not their job to create the vision. Get a consultant involved who can help you profile your audience, figure out what you need to deliver, layer in lead generation and offer advice throughout the development process.

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ENGAGEMENT	**Host an official kickoff meeting.** With the vision and expectations clearly established, it is time to roll up your sleeves and dig in with the web developer. Together you can reiterate the purpose of the site, determine roles and responsibilities, and lay out the production plan. Your focus should remain on how the site will reach and serve your target audience, and, in particular, prospects. You can trust the developer, but feel free to conduct your own research to verify they are on the right path. **Participate in the wireframing process.** Work from your preliminary sketches and any proposal documents to develop the site structure. This phase is mainly about user experience and information organization. Creative and content will layer on top of a strong foundation of functionality. **Be a project manager.** Even if the developer offers an account or project manager, it is your responsibility to ensure the project meets milestones, stays within scope, and maintains focus toward achieving what you originally set out to do. **Take advantage of the development phase.** The development phase is the quietest from the customer perspective because the web development company is busy programming. This is an ideal time for you to draft website copy, gather images, organize downloadable files, and plan for resources needed during uploading and testing. **Enter the testing phase with the mindset of the user.** When testing the site, don't just check for broken links and open the site in different internet browsers. Imagine you are a member of your target audience visiting your site for the first time. Are main messages clear? Is it easy to find information? Does the content leave you wanting more?	**Starting a project with a lackadaisical attitude.** You need to remain in the driver's seat as a project manager and creative director. If you let the developer drive the project and don't understand how changes in scope will impact the budget or timeline, your costs can quickly skyrocket and you will feel hostage to the new plans. This is such a common occurrence that developers write contracts and estimates in a way that compensates them for a customer's lack of knowledge. **Underestimating the project timeline.** In the planning process, timelines are created with the desired launch date in mind, and with the assumption that everything will go as planned. A website savvy B2B company with a good project manager can launch a site in three months. If a company knows what it wants, but is learning as they go and engages in multiple rounds of revisions, it can extend to six months. If a company is inexperienced and indecisive, think more along the lines of 12 months. **Assuming developers will help with content.** Many developers offer creative services and some offer content development, but it is not their strength. It is most efficient for internal resources at the company to develop the content in the messaging and tone the company typically uses. A website consultant also can guide content creation from a strategic level and most likely develop it more on par with what you are looking for.

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LAUNCH	**Determine the best launch plan for the site.** If your new site is informational and easy to navigate, launch it and share it with your contacts immediately. If your site needs users to create accounts, fill out forms, download files or engage in transactions, you may want to consider a longer rollout. For example, you may want to select small groups of your target audience to use the new site and provide feedback. Or, you may want to promote the site to an industry segment before making a larger announcement. The launch plan should align with the goals you have for the site.	**Assuming SEO is instantaneous.** Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of positioning your site as one of the top results from a search engine. There are many practices involving keywords, tags and links to make your site more visible to search engines, but it will take time – on average four to six months – for the search engines to consider your new site a credible source and regularly serve it up. The best way to become a top result is to answer the questions your prospects are entering into the search engine. Quality content naturally has those answers and while improving your rank, it also positions your company as the trusted industry leader.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In 2009, Mike Kuharske founded a marketing firm with a revolutionary model for helping B2B companies create a marketing system that produces strategic and predictable results. Gravity Marketing represents dozens of companies as their Virtual Marketing Officer, helping them grow revenue by optimizing marketing, advertising and business development efforts.

Strategic websites play a large part in creating 'gravity' around organizations, brands, products and services. Mike and his team regularly partner with numerous web development companies to design, develop and launch websites for clients which deliver value to target audiences, moving the sales process forward.

Prior to starting his own firm, Mike led the marketing efforts of a Milwaukee-based publishing and media company resulting in a tripling of revenue and unprecedented profitability. Additionally, his experience includes audience development, event production (attendance from 25 to 5,000), product development, strategic partnership development, marketing and B2B sales. He can be reached at 414.376.6500 or mkuharske@gravitym.com.