Your Firm on the Internet - Effectively

Thomas C. Kopke

A website can improve your corporate image and provide useful services to existing and *potential clients*. Just about anyone can design a website with commercially available software. However, many sites fall short of their intended purpose. Sites can appear competent but ultimately fail to provide any return on investment. The content, delivery, style, target audience and return on investment are all important design considerations. The subtleties of an effective website and what is required to deliver and maintain one are the subjects of this essay.

Understanding How Websites Are Used

The majority of visitors to your website are neither your clients nor your competitors. The typical visitor to your website are your *"potential clients."* The kinds of responses that your site generates from these visitors will determine the success or failure of your website.

The Internet is above all, a reference tool. People who use the Internet are in search of information. They are not interested in trivia, corporate self-promotion or cutting-edge animated graphics. They are looking for something. They are looking at your website to see if it has what they want. Having what they were searching for will determine if your firm has the capabilities to meet their needs. If they find what they want, you have a "potential client." It is a mistake to forget that people who use the Internet are impatient. Website savvy users will quickly determine if your site is a waste of time and will not spend a lot of time trying to figure out what your firm has to offer. They want answers immediately and they do not want to work to get those answers. Websites that do not give visitors what they want, quickly and easily, are discarded and rarely visited again. Visitors that receive no value from your site will not likely become clients. Therefore it only makes sense that your website must focus on the needs of your *potential* and current clients. Websites that provide value reflects positively on your firm. It demonstrates that you understand your clients.

Avoiding Common Mistakes

Will you benefit by being on the web? Maybe, but only if you are ready to make the commitment by investing your firm's time and effort. Eventually, having a website will be as common as having a listing in the telephone directory. Having the wrong website can do more damage than having none at all.

On the web, first impressions are important... but not as much as the last.

Web users, your existing and potential clients, are looking for information that is clear, concise and relevant. They will not find your website by randomly typing in addresses. They will find it by searching for subject matter that they hope **might** be on your website. Once the potential client arrives at your website, they hope to find what they were searching for. If the client is greeted with company history, mission statements, and other forms of self-promotion which is valueless to them, they will likely be disappointed and probably leave your website without further exploration. The impression left of your website is that *it offers no relevant information and it is just another page cluttering the Internet.* That potential client is lost never to return.

Visually, the site should mirror the purpose of the site. An artist's site would require greater focus on visual design than a Internet search engine. When the visual image does not match the purpose of the site, a lesser impression of the real value of your site is provided to the visitor. It's like food coloring - if given the choice between a normal slice of bread and one that had been colored blue, 99% of the population would choose the normally-colored slice. Though both slices of bread are the same, *the uncolored slice is chosen because bread is supposed to be that color, not blue!* Likewise, an artist's site needs to be artistic and a business site needs to be businesslike and so on. People tend to associate the visual impression with the product or purpose of the website. Making the right match will give your website the advantage.

Everyone has been to websites that are nearly impossible to navigate... not intuitive or easy to understand. For example, navigation link titles such as, *Places*, *Custom* and *Projects* are not clear as to their meaning. On the other hand, references like *Residential Developments*, *Custom Residential Design Capability* and *Past Residential Design Projects* are much clearer. Simplicity is the key where simple is preferred over stylistic navigation labels. The typical visitor is impatient when it comes to navigating a website. If it takes too much effort to find the right information then, again, they might be left with the "last impression" that your website is *not done professionally* and you run the risk that they will attach the same impression to your firm. Remember that you might not have other opportunities to change that perception.

How your firm operates with the website is crucial to the website's success. I've been to websites of national companies that do not list either a telephone number or email address. This doesn't appear that they care about having clients. Having contact information listed on your website is important - how quickly and accurately the responses are done are even more so. Web users expect replies to email messages within a short period. They make decisions based on the content of those replies - their decision could be one that decides if your firm is to be considered for work. Corporate policy should be developed that outlines how email inquiries are handled and to what level of content they contain. The reply that is delivered from a website based inquiry can determine your firm's consideration for work or included on a list of prospective firms for future work. A delayed or non-responsive reply will be the "last impression" of your firm - *they are not professional.*

The three most important things about a website are "content, content and content!"

Cutting edge graphics, animations and sound mean nothing without content. Content **must** be relevant to visitors' interests. The amount and depth of content reflects on your firm's image. Content must be current and correct to be of any value. This is responsibility of the company and not the website developer. Only you know what your clients interests. You know their frequently asked questions. You know their concerns. By creating content that reflects this, you have a website that visitors will find utility in and that provides a positive image of your firm. It gives your customers a reason to visit your website.

Too many websites allow content to become obsolete or do not check for correctness. A webmaster can only check for technical problems, it is the firm that must continuously check content and insure that it is current and correct. A national design firm went six months with having an incorrect telephone number listed on their website. When the error was corrected, approximately four calls a day were received resulting from the website - six months of lost business from the wrongly listed number is not a comforting thought. Content checking also means to check all links for operation. Having a website with reference links that go nowhere doesn't bode well on the image of your firm.

Anyone can do website design. Only a very few can do it effectively.

When I was a young lad, I was told I should be an architect since I could draw so well. *"Yeah, right!"* If architecture were as easy as running a pencil against an edge, Frank Lloyd Wright would have been just another run-of-the-mill architect. However, when it comes to a corporate website, many firms find the first person that is computer literate to create and maintain their website. This is akin to my drawing ability and being an architect. Some computer literates even succeed in creating a site that is visually attractive. The rest of the firm is happy about the "look" and *think* the person did a good job. Are they knowledgeable about effective website design? In most cases, no. This is ignorance judging incompetence whereas the ignorant likes the incompetent. Good design is not based on appearances. Good design is starts with accurate, clear content of value to the visitor within a structure that facilitates a visitors' ability to find your site and intuitively navigate about the site to find desired content.

Is the site cost effective?

It doesn't take rocket science to know if a website is generating new business. A bit of investigation will show if existing clients are using your website too. Now comes the cost of the developing and maintaining the website. If your firm is performing this work in-house, how much are you paying this person? I know of one firm whose firm's webmaster is paid six figures. Of course, that isn't the person's primary job. They were obviously hired for something else and time spend doing the website took away from revenue generating work at their pay scale. If they only spend 3 days a month related to the site, that is over $1,000 per month it costs the firm! Potentially, even more if this employee has a role of generating new business. Regardless of how good anyone thinks the person with the firm's website, the firm can do it for much less. This is typically done by either hiring a web design employee or contracting for a consultant.

Finding competent expertise to develop and maintain your firm's website should not be taken lightly. Many firms don't realize how inefficient their websites really are and that good design practice could improve business. The website portrays your corporate image in both style and content. Your firm's website is a reflection of the real image of your business.

Thomas C. Kopke is President of TC Kopke, Inc., a website design services company. TC Kopke, Inc., 10281 Triple Crown Avenue, Jacksonville, FL 32257, "send email".