



8 common small business web design pitfalls (+ how to avoid them!)

by Erik Wolf - President, Zero-G Creative

Web projects are challenging and always will be. My team and I know that just as well as anyone, having built dozens of web sites over the past two years alone. We know what to expect from the process, we know the technology, we know what works and what doesn't.

We have also been around this block enough times to know that many small business owners do not have much experience – if any – in managing web design and development projects.

This paper is meant to help you – the entrepreneur – get acclimated in the always changing and sometimes counter-intuitive world of web design.

Our “8 Pitfalls” represent some of the most common mistakes that we see business owners make during web design projects. Falling into any of these traps could lead to costly redesigns down the road or may even prevent your site from launching in the first place. Read on, this paper could save you thousands of dollars.

1 Poor Planning & Lack of Overall Strategy: This is definitely the big one on this list. Your web site is a business tool, just like any other in your company's arsenal and it needs to serve a function. “But I just need a web site as quickly as possible and I can't afford to do something strategic right now,” the business owner says.

The truth is there's no good reason to push

strategy to the back burner. In fact, it costs about the same to have a reputable firm or designer build a great site as it does a lousy one. And over time, it costs much less to build a great site once you've factored in the costs of constantly redoing the lousy one.

So what “function” does my web site serve? Probably more than one, but good answers would be lead generation, building credibility, generating e-commerce sales,

increasing presence on search engines, or possibly even addressing an operational concern like an overloaded customer service team. Knowing and understanding your business goals will give your design team great direction and will help them more effectively prioritize the elements in your layout. If your design group doesn't understand your business goals – or worse, doesn't care – you would be best served by firing them.

2 Flash Abuse: This is a trap that a lot of business owners don't just fall into, but leap into, headfirst and blindfolded all while tossing fistfuls of hundred dollar bills into the wind behind them as they fall. Get the picture? A great many business owners want interactive, animated, Flash'ed-up sites because Flash'ed-up sites are – well – cool. It's a way that they can show the world and, maybe more importantly, their friends, family and colleagues that they've arrived. But there's a problem... Most web audiences nowadays have a very LOW tolerance for Flash, at least in the way it's used in many sites.

For a vast majority of sites, Flash is best used as an accent... A means of doing something interesting, surprising and unexpected with an element of your design. It's also useful in helping your home page "freshen" itself every few seconds so your audience doesn't get bored looking at it. But it's no longer considered "OK" to have people jump up and start talking to the visitor as soon as the page loads. Other no-no's are music or heavy video that start as soon as the page loads. And the once obligatory Flash "intro" is a complete waste of your money and your visitor's time.

Here are some basic do's and don'ts for incorporating Flash into your site:

DO: Animate your logo or another iconic element in a subtle and unexpected way.

DON'T: Use Flash in your navigation; this will cause negative implications with search engines and mobile browsers.

DO: Use Flash in place of an otherwise static and purely cosmetic image.

DON'T: Animate actual page content. This is bad for search engines and overall usability.

DO: Allow your users to play a streaming Flash video or audio presentation.

DON'T: Automatically start any audio or video upon page load. It's overbearing and, let's face it, annoying and potentially disruptive or embarrassing, especially when visitors may be surfing your site at work or in a public place.

DO: Use Flash to accent your site. Much like hot sauce, a little goes a long way.

DON'T: Build all or even close to a majority of your site in Flash as this will likely cost you visitors and severely impact your site's presence on search engines as well as its browsability (if it wasn't a word before, it is now) on mobile devices.

DO: Use Flash to enhance your visitors' experience.

DON'T: Use Flash to enhance your ego or impress friends. Yes, this may be harsh but so is the reality – selfish marketing NEVER works. But we see this time and time again with clients everywhere. This may not be the worst mistake you can make on the web, but it's arguably the most common.

3 Search Engine Negligence: We can no longer use ignorance as an excuse when it comes to search engines and so failing to acknowledge them when designing a web site in this day and age constitutes negligence.

Now this isn't to say that all business owners should rely solely on Search Engine Optimization (SEO) best practices when scoping out a web project or even that every web site NEEDS to be optimized for search engines from the get-go... But every web site should be designed with search engine compatibility in mind so that SEO can be considered later should priorities change. That means using editable HTML text wherever possible/practical without hindering the design intent minimizing the use of Flash.

There's really no good reason for an upstanding business owner to build a site that is difficult or impossible for search engines to index. This is a decision that everyone comes to regret sooner or later and this is a mistake that WILL force your hand in redesigning your site before it's time. Be sure to ask your web designer/developer how compatible your site will be with search engines while it's still in the design phases. If their answer is "not very", ask for some ways that you can remedy that and be sure to understand the trade-offs from a design perspective.

4 No Calls to Action: This is important, though a lot of entrepreneurs don't exactly know what it means. Here's an explanation: when you get someone to your home page, you need to lead them in a direction. You need to tell them what you want them to do now that they are here... Sign up for a free consultation, get our white paper, buy our widget, join our

newsletter, read our blog, learn about our new service, etc. Don't be afraid to tell people where you want them to go and make it loud and clear.

Sometimes when we show a design concept that has a large call to action, the business owner will ask why we're drawing attention to something that is already available through the main navigation. Here's the answer... Web sites tend to have a lot of pages. Most SMB web sites (not counting e-commerce) tend to run from about 12-25 pages in our experience. All those pages are available in some fashion through the main navigation. But it's very likely that only two or three are REALLY important.

Use your home page and available space on throughout the site to drive traffic to the important pages; don't leave it up to chance that your audience will find that info on their own as they stumble through the rest of your site. When you tell people loud and clear how to get to the good content on your site, they will appreciate it. Their visit will be more productive if they can come to your home page and immediately find what they are looking for. Strong calls to action also increase the odds that a new visitor becomes profitable for you.

5 Looking Inward for Direction: All too often, we develop web sites from our own point of view. We look inward at what WE selfishly want instead of thinking objectively about what our AUDIENCE wants.

Understanding what our customers and other stakeholders/constituents are looking for is a critical early step towards success on the web, there is no doubt about it.

If you don't know where to start, try creating a "persona" or a profile of your

average customer. List out their wants and needs, their pain points and reasons that they would – and would not – be inclined to do business with you. Then create a different persona for each type of target constituent that visits your web site.

For example, if I had a products company that made sporting goods, I would likely have a persona for an end consumer, one for a retail partner and potentially one for a school or private sports league if I sold through those channels. I may even want to create a media persona when outlining requirements for a news area or a job seeker for my careers section if those aspects of my business are key to my overall strategy.

Having these personas in my back pocket gives me an easy way to put myself in someone else's shoes... If I'm a sales consultant and I've identified that my typical client is a busy CEO who is short on time and wants to see fast results, I probably don't want to make her sit through a lengthy video or online presentation. But I might allow her to request a specific day and time for a free phone consultation or possibly email some high level content that she can read at her leisure.

And here's another tip... "10-20 employee company in a service industry" can NOT be a persona because it's not a "person." The office manager, CFO or President at that company is though. Don't forget that only people can visit web sites; companies can not.

If you focus on addressing the wants and needs of your audience, it's a lot harder to take a wrong turn.

6 Using "If You Build It, They Will Come" in Place of a Marketing Plan: Unfortunately, the "Field of Dreams" strategy rarely works in the real world. If it did, our job as marketers and web designers would be a lot easier than it is.

I tell a lot of my clients to think of their web site as if it were a big event. You want people to come to your party, but how do you draw traffic? Odds are that reserving the ball room, DJ and caterer won't be enough. You would start by inviting your friends and encouraging them to come. Then you might tell them to bring their friends and then you might think about ways to attract strangers.

Your web site works the same way... If you don't do any work to draw people in, odds are that they won't come.

I've seen a lot of entrepreneurs look unhappily at their web stats and say, "What's wrong? We've got a great site and a great product, we've done the Search Engine Optimization... Where did we mess up?"

A client of ours contacted us recently with questions about SEO and why it wasn't working like it should. We looked at their analytics and found that nearly 75% of their site traffic was coming from search engines...

The first question that popped into my head wasn't "Why isn't our SEO drawing enough visitors?" but "Why aren't WE drawing enough visitors?" There are really only four ways that someone can access your web site:

1. Directly typing your URL or clicking from material that you sent them
2. Clicking a link to your web site from another web site
3. Finding you on a Search Engine
4. Paid advertising

In the case of our client, they only had three potential traffic sources (as they do not advertise) and one of those traffic sources was doing three times as much work as the other two combined.

Just think, if this company could just draw enough direct and referral visits to match what they were getting from search engines, their overall site traffic would increase by 50%!

And while retention programs aimed at current customers will help give the direct traffic numbers a boost, the biggest opportunity for success by far exists in building referral traffic from other sites.

Why? Because aside from the benefit of drawing the traffic from those other sites, those links will also create great SEO benefits. Popularity counts on Google and the more people talk about you the more important you will appear and the higher you will get ranked and the more search-related traffic you will get.

And don't forget... If one of your competitors is consistently ranked highly by Google and the other search engines, it likely isn't by accident. It's because they worked hard over time, not only on their SEO, but also on their overall reputation and presence in the online marketplace. You can't expect to beat them overnight. But do the right things with your web site and you'll get there as well. It won't be easy but it WILL be worthwhile.

7 Too Much Clutter! Strange but true: it's very difficult to build a simple, elegant web site. It takes a LOT of discipline and willpower on the part of the business owner. All too often, our instincts tell us to cram every bit of information we can onto a web page. This is not a winning strategy.

Oftentimes, web design is an exercise in restraint. It's easier to maintain boundaries in print materials; we are confined to the page. On the web though, many sites allow us to build pages of virtually infinite length, giving us room for as much text and as many photos as we could possibly want.

When in doubt though, keep it simple and, per pitfall number five on this list, always think of your audience.

Is your audience going to want to read all that text? Do they even have time? Will they understand what you're trying to illustrate in all of those images? Is this approach going to answer questions or cause confusion?

Assuming that a visit to your company's web site is a step in the process of building a relationship with a prospective client, you don't need to give them ALL the details online. Give them enough that they can qualify your firm as a potential product/service provider and answer their questions by way of an email, phone call or face-to-face meeting.

Trying to "jazz up" a simple but functional page with additional text and images just because you can is probably a misplaced effort and a poor use of time. Instead, I always try to go with the bare minimum of content necessary to make my point and inspire action from my audience.

I find that for the most part, the most successful sites are the ones that are friendly and approachable from the visitor's

point of view. After all, these are the people we're trying to impress; if we overwhelm or intimidate them, they likely won't stick around for long.



Letting Small Functionality Cause Big Delays in Going Live:

This goes back to the first item on this list with regard to setting priorities. If your objective is to create a technological masterpiece or to use advanced web technology as a competitive advantage then obviously, the minor functional details can be tremendously important.

By contrast, if your objective is to promote your business and build credibility for your firm, the sophistication of your programming just isn't that important. And every day you allow your web site to sit on the shelf because a little bell or whistle isn't quite ready does a disservice to your business.

If your car died would you go without a car for two months just because they didn't have one in stock with exactly the right sound system? Probably not... Most rational people would buy the car with the standard system as soon as possible and upgrade later.

Treat your web site the same way, realizing that you only need four basic things to get "on the road" with a good site:

- 1. A sound strategy**
- 2. A good resource for design and development**
- 3. Content**
- 4. A means for keeping the site up to date once its live**

All other interests with regard to a basic site design project are secondary and should be treated as such. You're always going to be

better off with a live site that only does 95% of what you want it to than you will with no site at all.

Always be wary of the "show-stopper" when planning your web project. These are the little nuggets of functionality that will often become the most expensive part of the project and the biggest headache.

Keep your eyes on the big picture as much as possible and if relatively small functionality starts causing big problems, don't be afraid to table those items until after the launch.

The same goes for e-commerce. If you want to understand the complexity of your project should you require e-commerce, start by mapping out a traditional e-commerce purchase process:

- 1. Select Category**
- 2. Select Product**
- 3. Add Product to Shopping Cart**
- 4. Proceed to Checkout or Return to Step 1 to Continue Shopping**
- 5. Enter Personal Information**
- 6. Enter Shipping Details**
- 7. Enter Credit Card Details**
- 8. Authorize Credit Card or, if declined Return to Step 7**
- 9. Transaction Complete; Merchant and Purchaser Notified**

The more you deviate from these nine steps, the more custom work will be required which means a longer and more expensive project. And in many cases, those customizations may not bring in as much money as they cost to develop (a threshold you should be aware of as you are planning).

I usually recommend throwing out every custom feature that isn't absolutely necessary for doing business on a startup e-commerce

site. If your business is new, your initial customer volume is not likely to be very high... And so you can afford to take certain parts of the process offline, and handle them by email or fax instead in the short term. If your success depends on being able to sell direct via the Internet, get yourself in a position to be selling as soon as possible and keep your investment manageable.

Your early experience will probably also teach you things about your business and

your customers that you did not expect and you will be thankful that you didn't overspend on frivolous functionality the first time around so that you can better direct your follow-up investment.

There always is a follow-up investment, by the way and your web site will not last forever. You may as well plan for a "phased" build-out from the start rather than try to get everything and the kitchen sink in your site from day one.

About Zero-G Creative

You don't need to be a \$50 million company to look like one. Zero-G Creative delivers sound marketing advice and award-winning design to small businesses and startups at affordable prices.

Zero-G's full suite of services includes branding, marketing strategy, graphic design, web design, e-commerce, collateral development and more – all delivered to an exclusively small and mid-sized business clientele. With Zero-G at their side, entrepreneurs know they can reach for the stars.

About Erik Wolf

A small business marketing expert, Erik Wolf founded Zero-G Creative to work with entrepreneurs who felt "weighed down" by ineffective marketing and small budgets.

Having gained experience in a variety of industries including consumer products, IT and journalism, Erik became a full-time entrepreneur in 2006. Erik holds an MBA in Marketing from Georgia State University and a BA from Emory University. He lives in Johns Creek, Georgia with his wife and two children.