

# Creating a Website

## Web Basics

Your website is your company's public face, influencing your customers' first impression of your company, its products, and its services. Whether your company makes games, educational software, or financial computing tools, your website should provide a smooth, effective experience for your customers—allowing them to easily make purchases and find the information they need.

The goal of an effective website is to convert visitors into customers. Even a small company can have a big-company feel with an effective website, but what are the elements of a website that make it effective? This document presents some web design basics to consider when creating or updating your company website.

## Look and Feel

**Layout and a consistent use of colors, graphics, and type style work together to create the look and feel of your website.**

### Window size:

In the early days, websites were designed for 640x480-pixel windows. Now the norm is 1024x768 (although some designers still design for 800x600 and some opt for 1280x1024).

### Consistent layout:

Continuity is very important. Your logo and the links or buttons on your main menu should be in the same position on every page of your site. Typically the logo is in the upper-left corner of the screen and the menu is along the top or sometimes on the left side.

One way to ensure a consistent look throughout your site is to use a set of templates for your home page, section or category pages, and content pages.

### Colors:

Don't choose a color for your website just because it matches your logo. When choosing colors, your primary concerns should be that your site is readable, appealing to your target market, and is a cohesive part of your corporate look and feel.

### Background image:

Especially if your site is designed so that it remains centered no matter how the window is resized, consider using a subtle tiled background image to fill the area around your website. However having no background image at all is preferable to using an image that will distract your visitors from the content on your site.

## Navigation

Visitors to your website navigate through it to find the information they want. An intuitive navigation system such as a prominent menu is an important part of an effective website.

### You are here:

Let your visitors know where they are in your site. This can be accomplished by highlighting the menu item after selection, prominently displaying the name of the page, or showing the path the user took to get to the page (sometimes called “bread crumbs”).

### Menus:

The first thing most visitors look for on a website is the menu or other way to navigate to the information they want. A basic rule of web design is to place your menu at the same place on every page and to change it as little as possible between the pages.

It’s a great idea to have drop-downs, highlights, and other interactivity in your menus – but only if they work well.

Having simple non-interactive menus is far better than having interactive menus that are too slow or unreliable.

### Match the link and page names:

The title shown on a web page should match the name of the link that leads to it. For example, the link (and the menu item) that leads to your “About Us” page should say “About Us”. If you want your link to say “Company,” then change the title of the target page to “Company” as well.

### Broken links:

Broken links interfere with your customers’ experience of your website. Many web reporting tools will generate a report of all broken links on your site. Run this report regularly and fix any broken links you find.

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## Distractions and Special Features

The goal of your website is to inform visitors about your products and services and to convert visitors into customers. It is important to avoid adding features to your site which will annoy or distract visitors and cause them to leave.

### Visual distractions:

Depending on your market, you should keep animations and moving elements to a minimum so as not to distract your visitors from their business of learning about your products and services. While animations and flashing colors are good ways to draw the eye toward an ad or other feature, they are generally considered a distraction and if overused may actually cause your visitors to leave your site.

### Music or no music?:

Music and other sounds on your site is perfectly reasonable in some markets while in others it is considered a distraction. If you include music or other sounds on your site, be sure to include a “mute” button on your page for those visitors who do not wish to hear it. If you use sound to provide key information about your company or products, be sure to include a text version of the content as well.

### Popups:

Keep popup windows to a minimum and don’t rely on them to deliver key information. Many people disable popups in their web browsers, considering them an annoyance and a possible source of spyware. If popups are required on your site, let your users know that they must enable popups to use your site; but be prepared for some users to decide to simply leave your site rather than enable them.

### Using Flash?:

Unless you are using Flash or other animated content for the actual site navigation, include a “Skip” button so the user can quickly get to his content without waiting for your files to load. If using the Flash for your navigation, be sure that plain links are immediately available so impatient users can begin navigating. Right or wrong, some users consider Flash a hindrance to their mission of getting the information they need. If it’s not substantive, then consider skipping it.

## Web Coding Details

Whether your website is created in a text editor or in a full web authoring tool, attention to details are important to achieve an effective website.

### Browser support:

Make sure your site can be used by the largest possible number of visitors by testing it in multiple web browsers. Commonly you should test on Microsoft Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox, and Apple Safari browsers in the current and also the immediately previous versions.

### New window:

When a link on your site leads to a web page that is not part of your site, or when opening a PDF file or other document, consider opening it in a separate window using the "target" parameter. This will make it convenient for your visitor to continue browsing on your site when finished with the other content.

### Graphic details to speed page load:

Use the "height" and "width" parameters in every <img> tag to specify the size of every graphic on your page. This will improve the page load speed.

### Optimizing for search:

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a major topic in web marketing today. Even if you do not have the resources for

a large web marketing campaign, you should at least cover the basics. Make sure that search engines can index your website by using the title, description, and keyword <meta> tags on your web pages.

### Alt text:

Some HTML tags include an optional "alt" parameter which indicates what text to display when the user moves his mouse cursor over an item. In the case of images, this alt text is also displayed if the graphic cannot be downloaded for any reason—which makes it especially important to use with graphics for navigation buttons. Alt text is also used by some systems which serve websites for the visually impaired.

### Special characters:

Use the correct character codes in your HTML to insert special characters. For example, the code &#copy; will create the copyright symbol most of the time, but to ensure that the symbol will always render correctly, use &#169; instead. To insert a single blank space, use the "non breaking space" character &nbsp;. These codes all begin with an ampersand (&) and end with a semi-colon (;).

*For more information about search optimization see the "Search Engine Optimization Basics" how-to document.*

*For more information about special characters in HTML see <http://www.w3.org/MarkUp/Guide/Advanced>*

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## Web Messaging and Privacy

The text on your website informs your visitors, helps them navigate through your site, and provides information to search engines so that potential customers can find you.

### Web copy:

Copy for the web should be succinct, requiring as little scrolling as possible. Rather than duplicating your brochures on the web, use brief, compelling copy that will inspire your visitors to download brochures, contact you, or purchase your product.

### Call to action:

Have a clear call to action on every page. For example, on a "Services" page, don't just list what your services are.

Include links to examples and a link so visitors can contact you or place an order.

### Use key words:

When you decide on the key words for each page in your website, go beyond listing them in the <meta> tag. You should also use these words in the verbiage on your web pages. In general about 5% of the text on a page should contextually use your key words and phrases to increase your page "ranking" by search engines.

**Login:**

If you have content that requires special login for access, indicate near the link that login will be required and explain why it is required. Also provide a link for those who have forgotten their passwords.

**Languages:**

These days we all do business in a global environment. Consider offering multiple language versions of your site. If you offer web pages in languages other than your own, be sure to have your content professionally localized.

**Requesting contact information:**

Requiring contact information in exchange for a download is appropriate in some cases, and not in others. While requiring contact information will discourage the merely curious from downloading your content, some people with legitimate interest will be discouraged as well. Only collect information if you are really going to use it.

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## Web Graphics

The graphics on your website play a key role in shaping the overall look and feel. From buttons and page headers to logos and photographs, proper use of graphics can have a big impact on the attractiveness and usability of your website.

**Masters and copies:**

Save "master" copies of your files, then save optimized copies for use on your website. If you need to change any of the graphics, always start with your high-resolution master and save a new copy.

**File size:**

Using files that are too big can dramatically affect the user experience of your site. Every graphic on your page must be downloaded by your visitor, so it is very important to keep file sizes as small as possible. Although there is no hard rule, try to keep every graphic under 1 K if you can. But be careful not to go too far: you want your graphics to be small, but they also need to be readable.

**HTML resizing:**

Resize the pixel dimensions of images in your graphics program instead of using HTML tags. For example, if a graphic will show on your site at 200 pixels wide by 30 pixels high on your website, provide a file of that size.

**Proportions:**

Be careful to resize your graphics proportionally, as non-proportionally sized graphics detract from the professional appearance of your site. This is especially important for logos.

**GIF vs. JPG:**

Save line drawings, text, and simple graphics as GIF files with the smallest color palette necessary. Save photos or complex drawings as JPG files with the most compression possible without degrading the image.

**Enhance the image:**

To enhance the appearance of your web graphics, increase their brightness and contrast.

**Resolution:**

As you work on your web graphics, the last step before saving a copy for your website is to reduce the resolution to 72 dpi.

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*For more information about optimizing web graphics see <http://www.webreference.com/dev/graphics/>*

## Next Steps

Your website is an important part of your overall brand. More than a way to just tell prospective customers about your products, your website promotes your company brand, provides crucial technical support, and can even serve as a major way to sell and distribute your product. A good website can be a very powerful and effective tool for your company, but a bad website can hurt your professional image and alienate customers.

Unless you are a web developer, consider hiring a professional to develop your website for you. Spend some time looking at your competitors' and other websites to develop ideas for what you do and do not like. If you are not ready to launch your entire website, at the very least put up a professional, attractive page with your company logo, contact information, and information about your product. If you list an email address on your website, then be sure to monitor it and reply to inquiries promptly.

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