

# Launching A Successful Web-Site

A White Paper by Prime Choice





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## **Copyright and Usage:**

### ***What is a copyright?***

Copyright is a form of protection provided to authors of original works by the laws of the United States and international treaties to which the United States is a party. The copyright laws of the United States give the owner of the copyrights to a work, the exclusive rights to:

- Reproduce the copyrighted work in copies however produced (e.g. photocopying, scanning, faxing, electronically);
- Prepare derivative works (e.g. translations, revisions, abridgments, dramatizations, video adaptation, any other form in which the work may be transformed or adapted)
- Distribute copies for sale;
- Perform or display the work publicly; and
- Authorize others to do any of the above

### ***What is the copyright policy of Prime Choice?***

It is the policy of Prime Choice to reserve all copyrights to itself and to vigorously pursue any unauthorized use of its work.

### ***Can I use this White Paper?***

#### **If you are an End-User:**

For the purpose of this paper, Prime Choice defines an end user, as a person or organization that is launching a web-site for their own benefit.

You may print this paper in its html or PDF format, and use it as a reference or aid in launching your web-site. Should you encounter others that would benefit from the paper, please direct them to the html link from which you downloaded the paper.

#### **If you are a Consultant, Web Designer or a non end-user:**

You may direct your users to the html link from which you downloaded the paper. You may request usage rights by contacting Prime Choice.

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## **Introduction:**

There are millions of web-sites on the Internet, and probably tens of thousands on any particular subject. An organization entering this arena must understand what is involved in creating a successful web-site and be willing to “count the cost”. The adage, “You get what you pay for.” is decidedly un-true when it comes to building a web-site. You are as likely to “spend too much for too little”, as you are to “spend too little for too much”. A more accurate statement is “You get what you prepare for”.

At the core of the problem is a lack of understanding or appreciation of what makes a web-site successful. Further frustrating the problem is the host of web design firms competing for your business, and the ever lowering of acceptable standards. The craze today is to have a web-site, not to have a successful web-site.

The intent of this white paper is to aid an individual or organization in the construction of a successful web-site. By explaining elements of success, search engine technology, web-site structure, and the development process, this paper hopes to equip the potential web-site owner with the information to make informed decisions. Obviously there are always exceptions to any rule, and this will be true here as well. Following these steps will not ensure success and conversely, ignoring steps will not guarantee failure. The intent is to have a plan, and work the plan.

## ***What is a Successful Web-Site:***

Ask a dozen people, and you’ll get at least six different answers. For the purpose of this paper a successful web-site is defined as follows:

*“A web-site that reaches (can be found by) an intended audience, and clearly conveys the product or message to that audience in an effective manner.”*

## ***Who Should Read this White Paper:***

- **Persons or Organizations desiring a new web-site:** If you are about to develop, or contract development on a web-site, this paper will help you understand important elements in launching a new web-site.
- **Persons or Organizations desiring to improve a web-site:** If you have a web-site that can not be found, or is not producing results (selling products, getting sign-ups, conveying an important message), this paper will help you understand key-elements required to over-haul your existing web-site.
- **Web Design Firms:** If you are a web design firm, be it a one-person show or a small to medium shop, this paper will help you put into place a process flow aimed at delivering a successful web-site, and satisfied customers.
- **Web Hosting Firms:** You often get left holding the bag, when a user's web-site does not meet their expectations. At best, you must answer performance questions that have nothing to do with your hosting services, and at worst, you loose a customer that is forced to give up after an unsuccessful run. This paper will help you educate your customer on how to develop an effective web-site.

## **The Slant Towards Professional Development:**

It will become clear early on that this paper prefers a development approach that uses a professional web design firm. Like any other discipline, specialties are developed, not happened upon. Specialties require a level of commitment not easily obtained by a hobbyist. While exceptions abound, most successful web sites were developed by an individual or group of individuals that have taken the time to develop the skills and experience required to do so. It should also be noted that this paper allows a wide discretion in the definition of "professional", with the concentration on those that can deliver effective, successful web-sites, not those with industry certifications or higher education.

## **The Internet is Marketing:**

A web site is all about marketing. Marketing is often confused with selling, and conversely, sites that don't sell a product often ignore important marketing techniques. Unless your site is a private diary (BLOG in today's jargon) your site must market. If a web-site is worth developing, it is worth viewing, and if it is worth viewing, you need viewers. The essentials of Internet Marketing should be no different than any other marketing media.

## ***Competing for Viewers:***

Two of the most common myths are; if you build it they will come, and, if the content is worthwhile they will stay and read. The fact is that unless you tell viewers about your site

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they probably won't find it. Likewise once they get there worthwhile content will not compel them to stay and read.

### **Competing for Viewers (traffic):**

With the millions of web sites on the internet, the adage, finding a needle in the haystack has taken on a whole new dimension. One of the questions we handle, is "Why can't I find my web-site on the search engines?" The answers to this question are often discouraging.

1. While many search engines crawl the internet, looking for new content (especially Google), many engines will not find your site without some help, and worse, most new listings will often be ranked so low as to appear non-existent.
2. Your site design is just not search engine friendly.
3. There are thousands of sites with the same or similar content. What makes your site unique enough to displace those that have been available for months or years?

A web site must be designed with both readers and search engines in mind. Most search engines "try" to be the viewer. The programmers have developed algorithms that attempt to break down a web pages structure and content the way a reader would. They then extract out the searcher's keywords, grade those keywords relative to the surrounding content including page's structure (header tags) and assign a score. That score is one of several components used to determine page rank (where your site appears relative to everyone else's). Given that a lot of work has been done on the part of search engines to "be the viewer" it is not surprising that a site designed poorly for the search engine is designed poorly for the viewer. Most web sites quickly loose the interest of both.

### **Competing for Viewers Attention:**

It is a myth that folks will stay and read something that is worthwhile. Let's face facts; there are tens of thousands of web sites with very worthwhile content that never get read. So you managed to get a viewer to your site, unless that viewer is your best friend, why would they stay and read your content over the thousands of pages available with the same or similar message? In the same way the page must consider the search engine, the page must consider today's reader. The most common problems with web sites today are:

1. Flat no graphics, lacking visual stimuli, boring.
2. Too graphically intensive, slow, sluggish
3. Cheesy, cheap graphics or cartoons.

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4. Too much animation
5. Too little content (text)
6. Poor or no structure to message
7. Content that tries to be too generic, hoping to appeal to everyone

The basics of writing learned in high school, are largely abandoned on the internet. Remember the golden layout? Tell them what you're going to tell them; tell them, and then tell them what you told them. Remember learning that every paragraph begins with a header sentence, contains 2-3 supporting sentences, and a closing/conclusion sentence. Now look at a dozen web sites and count the ones that follow any sort of writing guidelines.

### ***It is all about communication (marketing):***

A web site must communicate and it must do so fast. Because a viewer has so many choices, the web master must capture viewer's attention in less than 30 seconds. After the page loads, (part of the 30 seconds) the page must hook the viewer in 10-15 seconds. To do this, a web page must have proper layout, some visual stimuli (eye candy), and sufficient structure.

### **Visual Stimuli**

Graphics (including flash) need to be content relevant, reasonably unique, high quality and fast loading. The perfect graphic will begin to make a case for the content it accompanies, and in a perfect world, tell the story pictorially. Inserting a cartoon, overused picture, distracting animation . . . just for the sake of having a graphic does more harm than good. First it tells the viewer how amateur the web designer is, and second it detracts from the content.

### **Page Structure**

HTML header tags are provided for a reason, namely to lend structure to a page. Assume the content scrolls 3-4 pages, and explains 3-4 aspects of a given subject. Proper use of header tags allows a viewer to quickly skim the page, and get a "feel" for the content that will be covered. Further breaking content down using h1, h2 and h3 tags show the structure of the content (what relates to what). Other tags like list and bullet tags lend even more structure. Often 3-4 bullets convey information faster than a paragraph explanation.

### **What Is Good For The Reader:**

Turns out that what is good for the reader is also good for the search engines. Remember that search engines try to emulate the reader to determine the value

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(rank) of a page. When a web page is properly thought out, has a good structure and carefully written content, the result will be a page valued by reader and search engine alike.

## **Steps to Building an Effective Web Site:**

### **Understand Your Product or Message:**

The product is what you are offering the viewer. It may be goods, a service or a message, but make no mistake it is a product. Churches are especially prone to not understanding their product. Consider the following:

I recently asked a pastor what he hoped to accomplish with his web site. The excited pastor replied immediately that he wanted to evangelize the community and minister to the broken. When I reviewed the web site, the closest thing to evangelism was the “Roman Road to Salvation”. The rest of the site contained information about the church; service times, location, ministries... All aimed at the local congregation. The steps to salvation link seemed almost an after thought.

Something was lost between the pastor’s product description, and the web site implementation. If the product were a communication tool to benefit the local body, then at least the content would have been on target (there were a lot of things wrong with the site, besides content).

### **Write and Re-Write the Content:**

Once you understand the product, write the content. But remember, if it is worth writing, it is worth writing properly. Treat your web site like a theme paper. It should have the same structure, references, and layout.

Initially, content writing should be done in a word processor. This allows the writer to concentrate on content, not design. Start by writing an outline. Review the outline with others to make sure it is properly structured. Now begin to fill in the outline, headers need introductory paragraphs, supporting paragraphs, and closing paragraphs. Paragraphs need introductory sentences, supporting sentences and closing/conclusion sentences. Remember the basic rules of writing and adhere to them. Write, edit, review, modify, edit, review . . until the content is right.

### **Using Graphics and Flash to Set the Mood:**

Now it is time to find the graphics. By graphics I mean photos, flash, and digital images. Depending on the length of content, and the size of the graphic, most

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pages can “handle” 1-4 carefully chosen graphics. Remember the graphic has to be high quality and IT MUST TELL THE STORY. It should either set the mood for the content, or it should make a point visually that reinforces the content. Avoid cartoons and non-relevant pictures. Again, use a word processor to test the impact of the pictures on the content. Get someone not familiar with the content to read the material, and comment on the impact of the graphics.

## Identifying Your Viewers:

Many make this the first step, and there is much to be said about that approach. When you identify your viewer, you write for the viewer. I prefer to write about my product, and then decide which viewers need my product. Again this could go either way; the approach you take is personal preference.

After identifying your viewers, read your content and ask the following questions:

1. Does the content address the needs/wants of the anticipated viewer?
2. Does the content “sell” the viewer? Remember, “sell” is not a bad word, it is a fact. You have a product, be it goods, a service or a message, and you must make a compelling argument (sell) the user on the product.
3. Are there any parts of the content that can be cut out without detracting from the sale? If so, cut it out. There is absolutely no value in making a person read something if it does not add value to your product.
4. Are there any parts of the content that might not be clear? If so, reword that piece to remove any ambiguity.

## Feeding the Search Engines:

Ok, now you have your product, you have your content, and you know your anticipated viewers. Remember I said earlier that a web site must be written with both readers and search engines in mind. Search engines are driven by key words. This is not to be misunderstood for document keyword tags. The key words (or phrases) referred to here are the words your potential viewer would submit to the search engine. In order for your site to rank well (remember the thousands of competing sites out there) the search engine must “value” your site over others for a given set of key words. As discussed earlier, part of the ranking algorithm is the presence of key-words, the relevancy of the keywords to the rest of the page, the page structure, etc. Search engine optimization is beyond the scope of this document but the following tips will help.

1. Understand what keywords a potential viewer will enter to find your site.
2. Make sure those keywords are present in your content.
3. Be sure that those keywords are not “over used” in your content. (Search engines call this spam, and will de-list your site for doing this). Generally content writer don’t need to worry about this unless they are specifically trying to spike their search engine position by adding keywords).

## Building the Web Site:

Web sites are containers for content. The reason I put web-site design here, is that a properly designed web site is built around the content, and the viewers. If the web-designer is not familiar with the product, the content, and the viewers how can they properly construct the container? Ideally, the web design firm will get involved early in the project to contribute to the steps outlined previously. The following process-line works well on most web site design projects.

1. User (company, church, organization) writes a description of the product or products.
2. User and Web Design Firm review product description. Web Design firm acts as a sounding board to further define the product description.
3. User constructs first content outline
4. User and Web Design Firm review content outline and make modifications if necessary.
5. Web Design Firm researches keywords that are likely to be used by viewers. These keywords are sent to the user to be included in the content writing.
6. User and Web Design Firm discuss and agree on color schemes, and graphical theme.
7. User and Web Design Firm discuss and agree number of pages (containers for content).
8. Multi-Tasking
  - a. User writes content
  - b. Web Design Firm designs primary page, including header mast, flash, graphics. . .
9. Web Design Firm reviews user content, ensures proper mix of key-words are present.
10. User reviews Draft Web-Site, ensures color scheme and graphics are correct.
11. Web Design Firm adds content to web site
  - a. Properly uses header tags, lists, and bullets . . . to ensure site has a proper structure/layout.
  - b. Web Design Firm submits style sheets and HTML to validation software to ensure that there are no broken HTML or style tags
12. User reviews and requests changes or approves web site.
13. Web Design Firm submits web-site to search engines. (Note that this is the very last step. Submitting an incomplete site, or a site not properly optimized for the search engines can lead to disastrous results)

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## Picking a Web Design Firm:

### ***Coder or Marketer:***

Web design is no longer the occupation of technical gurus, skilled writers and graphical artists. WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) tools like MS FrontPage and DreamWeaver make it possible for any 12 year old to build a web-site. Not surprisingly these web sites are all built from the same program supplied templates, and look/feel the same. Also, many of the word processors are able to “convert” a page to passable html. The effect this new technology has had on the Internet is nothing short of phenomenal. What was once the home of carefully crafted educational dissertations and company identity sites, has now become the home of tens of thousands of “me too” web sites. This lowering of the bar burdens the viewer (and search engines) with the task of sifting through the chaff to find real and meaningful content.

Search engines and viewers in an attempt to regain productivity, have developed a grading scale that excludes tens of thousands of web sites from consideration, even if the “meat” of the content is meaningful. Search engines using objective algorithms penalize sites with poor structure, invalid html, slow loading times, and other “secret” measurement criteria. Viewers subjectively exclude sites that appear amateur, have poor navigation, lack visual stimuli or according to their own internal rating system just don’t measure up.

Most web sites are developed by coders, or by non-coders with the aid of a WYSIWIG design tool. Little or no thought is given to structure, presentation, and search engine or viewer acceptance criteria. When picking a design firm, make sure that they understand the total picture, and have the experience to raise your site above the tens of thousands of “me to” websites on the Internet today.

### ***What to Look For:***

Remember my basic premise from the start of this article, a site that is worth publishing, is worth publishing properly. When selecting a Web Design Firm look for the following:

1. A firm that understands basic marketing strategies/techniques.
2. A firm that employees a formal quality assurance process during the site development.
3. A firm that has experience with search engine optimization or at the very least understands what search engines “don’t” like.
4. A firm that has (internal or external) graphics talent.
5. A firm that can develop the error free, search engine and viewer friendly html/style-sheet containers that will serve as the presentation of your content.

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Do your homework by looking at the Web Design Firms web site. This article has discussed certain characteristics of what makes a successful web site. Apply these characteristics and your own subjective rating system and determine if the site meets your approval. Most Design Firms provide some explanation of the “development process”. Look at the process and compare it with the project flow detailed in this article. One thing to bear in mind, web design firms are not immune from allowing their site to lag in favor of spending more time on client sites. This is especially true of small concerns, where there are only 1-3 members, each busily developing client sites. Still, the site should look professional, and “COMMUNICATE” effectively.

When interviewing the company do not use leading questions that give away the answer. We are all good at saying what the client wants to hear. Word your question carefully, then be patient and allow the respondent to answer uninterrupted, and un-aided by you. Give them enough rope, and they will either hang themselves, or weave a nice tapestry that builds both relationship and confidence.

### ***How Much Will I Pay?***

This is where things get real interesting. Home computers, the Internet, and secondary sources of income have created a wide open market for Web Design Firms. Because of this, price and the size of company do not necessarily reflect quality. Small 1-2 man moon-lighters are perfectly capable creating a very successful web site for you. Conversely, large firms with too many jobs, too much outsourcing and entry-level talent can end up costing a mint to deliver a ho-hum site. The point is to not dismiss the sole proprietor because they are moon-lighting, or to fall in love with the top dollar design firm because they are big. Look at your individual needs, your budget, and your interview/selection process and pick the firm that is best for you.

Thinking about the process flow discussed earlier, you should expect to pay for the time the design firm contributes to your project. This is often the first clue as to whether or not you’ve found an experienced firm. A firm that quotes a straight price per page, with no other fees, will likely skip some steps. This is ok if you have in-house talent to do keyword research, marketing analysis, etc., but if not your site will be lacking in this critical area.

Design Firms generally work on a per hour rate, with fees ranging from \$35hr to \$125hr with the medium of \$50-\$75hr. Most firms have developed Ball Park “package pricing” to make it easier for the client to estimate the total cost of site development. This is especially true for sites under 30 pages.

## Five Page Site Example:

For example a design firm might calculate a 5 page site as follows:

Assume: Simple site, non-sophisticated graphics, user supplies all copy (content), no special programming/shopping cart integration. . .

- 1hr client interview and product/message analysis
- .5 hr review content outline, agree on theme & color schemes
- 1hr complete content review
- .5hr keyword research
- 5hrs primary page design
- 1.5 hrs edit primary design (per your comments)
- 1hr secondary (inside pages) design
- .25-1hr per page fill-in (4 secondary pages)
- .5hr css/html validation (validate all 5 site pages)
- .25hr per page keyword optimization (generally 1 page on small non-selling site) Will take longer if they did not include keyword analysis at the start of the process
- 1hr search engine submission (based on submission to 5-8 most popular search engine sites).

Total time invested: 14.5 – 16.5 hours.

Assume the firm's base rate is \$50 per hour; a nice but simple 5 page site will range between \$725 and \$825. Additional pages that are based primarily on content fill-in will range from \$25-\$50 per page.

## Driving the Price Down:

In an effort to compete with the host of “coders” available to the customer, design firms have had to be creative in lowering their rates. There are three choices, lower their base rate, reduce the time it takes to build the site, or eliminate steps in the process.

### **Lowering the base rate:**

Entry level firms are known to do this to gain market penetration and build a reputation. The most common method of doing this is to offer a package deal that will deliver a 5 page site for \$300-500. The published rate is still \$50, but assuming they don't cut any steps out of the process, the actual compensated rate is lower. This allows the firm to recoup lost fees later in the process, or ongoing web maintenance. As workload increases, they will gradually raise their package prices to reflect the actual \$50hr rate published.

### **Reducing Design Time:**

A firm that has been in business for a while will have developed a number of basic layouts. These layouts can serve as the base from which they construct your web-site. Color changes, graphics and font styles can be changed to deliver a semi unique look. The 5hrs allocated for a new design, can be reduced to 1hr using this method, eliminating 4 development hours or \$240 of the total project cost. Using the example previously discussed a \$725 web site now prices in the \$475-\$500 range.

Another popular choice is to use a template with no modification. This eliminates all of the 5hr design time, and a portion of the 1.5hr edit time, further driving down the cost of development. Templates are NOT bad, but they are not unique. A good template that is not overused in your industry is an acceptable compromise to consider when on a budget.

### **Cutting Steps Out of the Process:**

The most often employed cost reduction strategy, and from my perspective, the most expensive from a success standpoint, is to skip steps in the process. This is most often done by a firm with a “coder” mentality. The most often skipped (or reduced) steps are:

- 1hr client interview and product/message analysis: This step is generally not skipped, but reduced to “tell me what you want and I will do it”.
- .5 hr review content outline, agree on theme & color schemes: This step generally is regulated to “what colors do you like”.
- 1hr complete content review: This step is skipped entirely
- .5hr keyword research: This step is skipped entirely.
- 5hrs primary page design (Oddly enough, because earlier steps were skipped, this step will often take longer, and the designer will “eat” the difference. Further most “coder” shops underestimate this phase and budget only 1-2 hours).
- .5hr css/html validation (validate all 5 site pages): This step is skipped entirely.
- .25hr per page key-word optimization: This step is skipped entirely.
- 1hr search engine submission: This step is skipped entirely.

The result of skipping these steps is an overall reduction of development time of 2.5-5 hours. Shops like this generally allocate 1-2 hours for the primary page design (although taking longer) and wonder why they aren't getting paid a fair wage for their labor. The result is an overall dollar saving to you of \$150-\$250 but site effectiveness loss is immeasurable.



Note: If you have in-house talent to do these steps, especially if those talents are at a lower cost rate, this might be an acceptable method of development. The point is, these steps can NOT be skipped and still result in a successful site.

## **Summary:**

Earlier I stated that you don't get what you pay for; you get what you prepare for. This paper while not exhaustive has covered marketing, content, graphics, search engine considerations and how to pick and work with a web design firm. There is much more, enough in fact that there are whole books written on the subject. Use this paper as an introduction to a process, not the definitive reference on the process. If you don't take anything else from this paper, take this; any web-site worth publishing, is worth publishing correctly!