



CORPORATE WEBSITE TRENDS AND BEST PRACTICES REPORT

2023 Edition

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INTRODUCTION

This report provides managers with a high-level overview of key web development best practices and trends so they 1) are better equipped to make informed decisions, 2) are aware of available tools and resources, and 3) gain an understanding of current requirements, risks, and costs associated with their website.

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STRATEGY AND GOALS

The effectiveness of a website is dependent upon the thoroughness of the comprehensive marketing plan in which it exists, and adherence to a formal development process when created.

Ready + Aim + Fire = Effectiveness

Ready: Core values, vision, and mission.

Aim: Marketing plan, brand establishment, unique value proposition, marketing message, goals, strategies, tactics, and objectives.

Fire: Website development and deployment.

Core Values

The foundational values that drive your organization's vision and mission. For example:

- *Providing all of Idaho's businesses access to affordable legal services. Utilizing the best available practices and encouraging innovation, strategic planning, collaboration, and teamwork.*
- *Efficiency: Developing systems to ensure the best possible return on legal investment for the businesses of Idaho.*
- *Respect: Recognizing the value of every client and team member, honoring our diversity, and working together as an effective team to advocate legal services in Idaho.*
- *Quality of service: Making sure that each client is treated with personal respect and courtesy.*
- *Communication: Ensuring that the best interests of Idaho's businesses are consistently and clearly communicated with lawmakers and citizens.*

Vision (Future)

Your ultimate long-term goal to convert your core values into tangible benefits and solutions.

Example: Making Oregon a state where all businesses have affordable access to provide their employees world-class benefit packages.

Mission (Present)

What your organization is doing today to reach the long-term vision.

Example: Our organization educates Oregon businesses, and advocates for fair legal standards through seminars, online training, and by educating and lobbying the state legislature.

Marketing Plan

Brand: The overarching promise your stakeholders associate with your organization.

Unique Value Proposition (UVP): The unique value you offer to deliver the promise of your brand.

Marketing Message: The concise and consistent messaging based on your values, vision, and mission that will concisely and consistently communicate your brand and UVP.

Goals: Primary outcomes to achieve in order to deliver your unique value.

Strategies: Define what you will do to achieve your goals. Marketing strategies should be defined in a comprehensive marketing plan.

Tactics: Specific methods that will be employed for each strategy.

Objectives: Measurable targets to gauge the effectiveness of your tactics in accomplishing your goals. Objectives should be S.M.A.R.T.

- **Specific**—target a specific area for improvement.
- **Measurable**—quantify or at least suggest an indicator of progress.
- **Assignable**—specify who will do it.
- **Realistic**—state what results can realistically be achieved, given available resources.
- **Time-related**—specify when the result(s) can be achieved.

STRATEGY AND GOALS (Continued)

Objectives for websites are typically expressed as conversion rates for specific user types.

Example Website Tactics

New Prospect

Goal: To allow prospects to proceed effortlessly through the sales process path of the site.

Call to Action: Submit an RFP request on our website form, sign up for a mailing list, register for an event, etc.

Objective: Increase RFP requests by 10% in 2017.

Current Customer

Goal: Persuade our current customers to purchase add-on services.

Call to Action: View our promotion video and click purchase selection at the conclusion.

Objective: Increase our average client revenue by 5% in 2017.

Criteria for Marketing Tactics

All tactics such as your website should do at least one of the following:

1. Increase the reach of your brand/UVP (increase frequency).
2. Increase the effectiveness of each contact with a prospect or stakeholder (increase magnitude).
3. Decrease the cost of each prospect/stakeholder's interaction (decrease inventory).

CONTENT AND MESSAGING

The ongoing production of usable and accessible content that offers unique value to your prospects and client base should encompass at least 50% of your organization's efforts and expenses for your website.

A website with no graphic design that has a constant flow of quality, usable, and accessible content will outperform an elaborate site design lacking quality content.

For examples, view the websites of Google®, Wikipedia™, and Quora™.

Recommendation

Consider enlisting the services of a professional copywriter to ensure your content and messaging are comprehensive, cohesive, and effective. Even at the cost of shaving your budget from the design and development aspects of the project.

Focus on Branding, Messaging, and Content

A website's primary functions are content marketing and content delivery.

The ongoing production of usable and accessible content that offers a unique value to your prospects and client base should encompass at least 50% of your efforts and expenses.

A pitfall for organizations embarking on a new website project is to focus too much on the design and technical components of the project. These components are the "easy" parts in the sense that there are cost-effective vendors available who specialize in those aspects. What will ultimately determine the success of your website is the quality and relevancy of the messaging and content.

Quality content that offers value to your prospects and client base should take precedence over all else.

USER-CENTERED DESIGN

Develop your website from your target user's perspective. This encompasses not only your branding, messaging, and content, but also your website's design, structure, and user friendliness.

Users won't read your website when they first arrive, they'll scan it.

Usability

Offer clear, simple user paths for understanding your value proposition and accessing and using your content.

Remove all roadblocks for task-based interactions.

Don't make users think about where or how to find answers to their questions or user paths on your site.

Each step down a user path should be a mindless, unambiguous click. This not only includes providing a website that is responsive/mobile friendly, but also ensuring that navigation menus and user paths are not overly complex for all user types.

Treat Your Visitors Like Children (at First)

Your site visitors are intelligent; however, they are pressed for time and impatient. Structure the front-end of your site as if your visitors are third graders until a user path destination is reached.

Reinforce Your Unique Value Often

This applies first to your content and messaging. Sites that offer original content have greater authority and offer more value to prospects and clients, as compared to those that republish content authored elsewhere. This also applies to your design and messaging throughout the site.

Present a Compelling Call to Action

To the extent possible, don't make users scroll or click to the close.

User Centered Design Consists of:

Usability: Focused on tasks. The ability for a user to easily understand your organization as presented on your website and intuitively interact with your website. "Don't make your users think"—remove roadblocks to understanding.

User Experience (UX): How a person feels when they interact with your website. Their emotional connection to the task. Successful UX requires understanding your prospects and customers, their values, needs, and goals.

Usability	UX
Easy to use	Useful
Making a task intuitive	Making a task meaningful
Minimizing steps and removing roadblocks	Creating an emotional connection
What users do and how they do it	What users feel

User Experience is the Sum of:

- Quality of content
- Content delivery and content strategy
- User paths
- Interaction design
- Information architecture
- Usability
- Visual design

And is gauged by a user's emotional response.

The UX on your website should be consistent with the promise of your brand. For example, a user may have a great experience on a company's website, but that experience might not carry through when they interact with a person at that company.

USER-CENTERED DESIGN (Continued)

People buy from those they know and trust. Effective marketing is simply making people *feel* that they know and can trust you.

Why are my User's "Feelings" Important?

Because *people buy from those they know and trust*, and emotion is the catalyst.

Decisions are based primarily on emotion. Not just transactional consumer decisions, but any decision no matter how complex. In response to emotion, humans are compelled to do something, and that something in the context of your website would be to proceed through your sales process.

For existing customers, creating a positive UX environment reinforces their decision to choose your organization and creates an opportunity for the establishment of a ritual with your brand. Rituals encourage them to become more than just customers and progresses them toward becoming a relationship client, stakeholder, and evangelist.

UX Facts

Site visitors who can't find what they are looking for in a short amount of time will quickly abandon that site and search again for an easier solution.

Many users will abandon a site if it's not accessible across all device platforms (desktop, tablet, and mobile) or doesn't load quickly.

Improving customer experience (including web UX) is the dominant trend in 2017 for corporate marketing communications.

According to Gartner, in 2017, 89% of marketers expect customer experience to be their primary differentiator.

It is forecasted that by 2020 customer experience will overtake price and product as the key brand differentiator.

UX Recommendations

Revolve all content, structure, and design around the axiom:

People buy from those they know and trust.

Getting people to know your organization equates to providing easy access (usability) to clear messaging.

Getting people to trust your organization means evoking emotion, and displaying transparency.

- Less formal/more personable copy is more effective.
- Stock images and videos should be avoided. Photos should reflect authentic engagements of the organization with their clients in the context of delivering the promised value.

GRAPHIC DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Visitors immediately judge the credibility of a company based on visual design alone. A poor quality design or unfamiliar site structure can diminish its credibility and increases the likelihood of visitors leaving.

The graphic design of your website should be an unobtrusive backdrop that enhances the credibility of your content.

Credibility Through Design

Graphic design for business purposes should be distinctive, but not so original that it veers from the principles below. Adhering to the same principles that large, trusted brands use can impart credibility to your company subconsciously.

- **Keep it simple**—Less is more.
- **Establish a focal point**—Every page needs an obvious starting point.
- **Be negative**—Utilize white/negative space to emphasize content instead of necessarily enlarging or styling the content itself.
- **Consistency and repetition**—Attention to detail is what sets apart professional designs.

- **High contrast**—We see with contrast. Ensure high contrast in both graphic design and typography.
- **Proximity**—Ensure related elements are clearly associated with each other visually.
- **Alignment**—All layout elements should be on a grid. Left or right justification is usually preferable to center justification.
- **Bold type**—Use font size to create emphasis.
- **Venerability over vanity**—Use established design elements and standards for credibility rather than personal preferences.
- **The devil's in the details**—Misspellings, typos, and errors (no matter how small) will undermine your credibility.
- **Appeal to emotion**
- **Create trust**
- **Emphasize benefits and value** over features or products.



Applying professional design standards to marketing communications can greatly affect the degree of credibility a user assigns to your business.

WEB DESIGN TRENDS AND BEST PRACTICES

A user may be more assured of the credibility of your site if there are similarities in design, structure, and features to what they've seen on large, well-recognized company websites.

Design and Layout

- **Quality over quantity**—For both visual and content elements.
- **Minimalist design**—Each design element must have a clearly defined purpose or be removed.
- **Emphasis on type**—With minimalist designs, the quality of the remaining elements becomes more important. The use of distinctive and/or large typography, especially for headings, can serve double duty as a concise message and distinct design element.
- **Pithy, concise, and emotionally connecting** headings and lead-in copy.
- **Clear, intuitive user paths** that allow access to lengthier content sections without overwhelming the user up front.
- **“Flat” design elements**—Fewer colors, fewer color gradients, well-defined edges and sections offset by solid colors.
- **Panel/card/grid layouts** that distribute information in a visual way so visitors can easily consume bite-sized pieces of content without being overwhelmed.
- **Short videos**—30 seconds or less, emotionally connecting, featuring organization members and/or clients.
- **Transparency and authenticity**—For example, prominently displaying team member photos will connect emotionally with the users and develop trust. Providing communication channels for individuals within an organization helps establish a sense of trust and transparency.
- **Conversation over declaration**—Promoting venues for users to communicate and collaborate, and participating in those venues (such as social media).
- **Longer, scrolling pages**—This is a trend, not necessarily established as a best practice. Successful implementation depends on well written and organized content.
- **Visitor accommodation**—Approximately 50% of all visitors will be using a device other than a desktop or laptop computer. It's important to not only provide a mobile-friendly framework, but also to ensure content, navigation, page length, and load times meet the needs of all users.

Frameworks and Templates

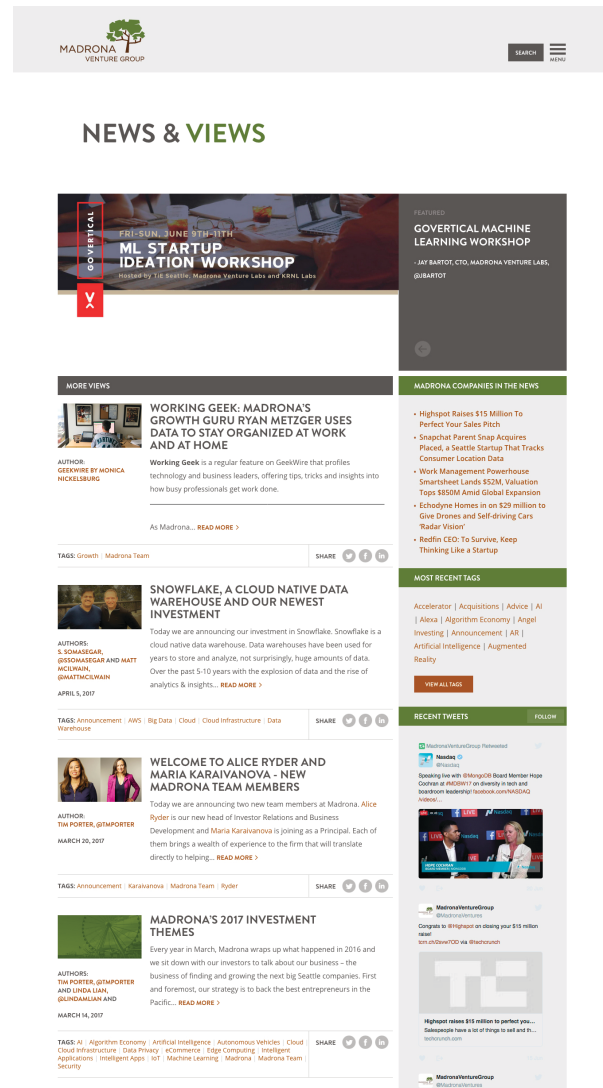
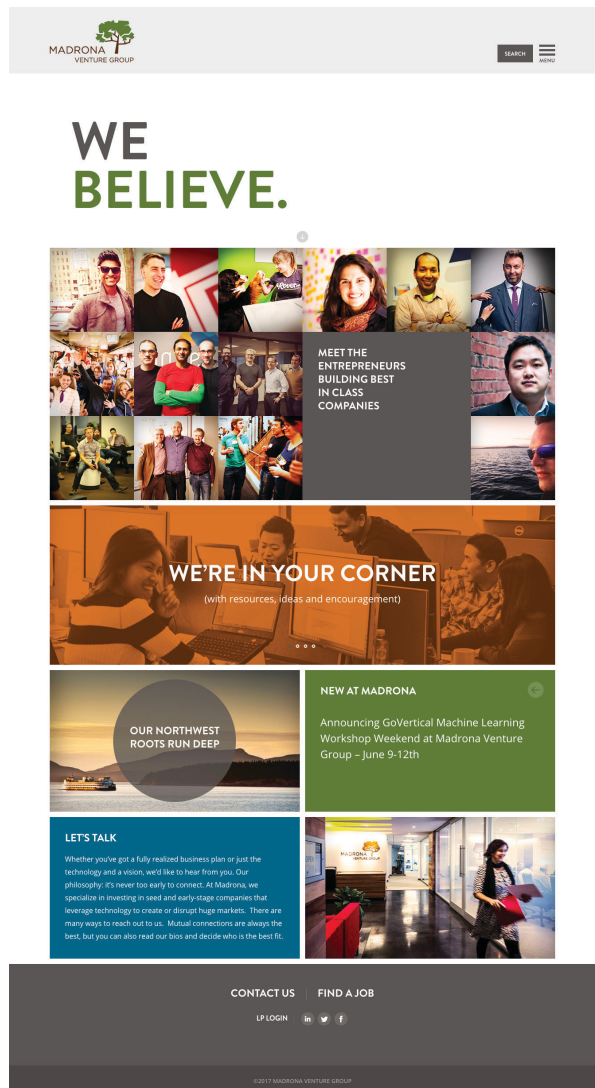
- **Responsive frameworks**—A responsive framework is a collection of prefabricated components that can be mixed and matched for constructing a website. The use of responsive frameworks, in particular Bootstrap™, has become commonplace in web development and in many situations can offer advantages in quality, functionality, and cost efficiency. A responsive framework can be the basis for both custom and template designs.
- **Customized template designs**—The use of developers basing a site design by modifying existing templates has increased in frequency. The degree of customization available to developers on some template structures can produce final sites indistinguishable in quality from a custom design. The advantages include reduced development time and cost, and increased feature reliability. Some frameworks and templates provide time and cost savings for accessibility and SEO.

Warning: Not all frameworks and templates offer the same quality and adherence to accessibility and SEO standards. Avoid selecting one without input from your developer. Some templates may look nice advertised but have serious shortcomings when implemented.

WEB DESIGN TRENDS AND BEST PRACTICES (Continued)

Madrona Venture Group's website exemplifies many of the design trends mentioned. Most significantly, their site demonstrates an efficient user path from general to detailed content.

Visit www.madrona.com to view the full site.



Website screenshots used with the permission of Madrona Venture Group.

SECURITY

Cybersecurity threats are rapidly increasing in frequency and criminals are refining the complexity and effectiveness of their attacks. In regard to cybersecurity specific for websites, the risk is almost exclusively associated with content management systems (CMS).

74% of infected websites in Q3 2016 used WordPress. (Sucuri)

Vulnerable software is the leading cause of website hacks.

Statistics from Sucuri's Hacked Website Trend Report Q3 2016

- Across common CMS platforms, between 61% and 94% of CMS installations were out of date at the point of incident.
- Three WordPress plugins accounted for 18% of site hacks.
- 15% of infected websites were blacklisted by Google®, Norton®, or McAfee®. Blacklisting a domain has the potential to disrupt all domain related services.
- 72% of malware attacks included a backdoor. Backdoors allow an attacker to retain access to the environment long after they have successfully infected the website and allow the attackers to bypass any existing access controls into the web server environment. The effectiveness of these backdoors comes from their elusiveness to most website scanning technologies.
- There is a trend for more files to be infected per hack (a 15% increase from 2016 Q2).

The complete Sucuri Q3 report is available at:

<https://sucuri.net/website-security/hacked-reports/Sucuri-Hacked-Website-Report-2016Q3.pdf>

Gartner: *Special Report: Cybersecurity at the Speed of Digital Business*. August 30, 2016

<http://gtnr.it/2r6cn3r>

Recommendations

- Take the risk and increased cost of security and maintenance into consideration when deciding on the benefit to your organization of using a CMS.
- If you do select a CMS, ensure you invest in adequate security, services, and development support to offset the risk of hacking.

DISABLED USER ACCESSIBILITY*

The Department of Justice has determined that the web is a place of public accessibility and therefore subject to the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other accessibility laws.

All organizations are required by law to provide accessible websites. However, certain types of businesses may have a greater legal imperative to do so.

Section 508 accessibility requirements for government-funded organizations and contractors are now the more stringent WCAG 2.1 AA standards.

Accessibility Overview

Web accessibility refers to providing websites that are usable by individuals with disabilities.

Web accessibility is on track to potentially revolutionize how businesses and organizations provide online assets both internally and to the public, and is something every organization should be aware of regarding both their Internet and intranet applications.

Modern commercial building construction is required by law to include accessibility features such as wheelchair ramps, lower height drinking fountains, and minimum clearance specs for restrooms. If they do not provide these features they will exclude a portion of the population who is disabled from the ability to equally access and utilize the services housed in those buildings. In addition, they may open themselves up to legal action and may be fined by the Department of Justice (DOJ) or sued by private parties under the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and/or other laws that pertain to accessibility.

In the same manner that the commercial construction industry was changed by the requirements of the ADA the digital workspace is being transformed now.

Web Accessibility Laws

Until recently, the standards for web accessibility were not clearly defined and the DOJ did not actively enforce standards. There has been a significant shift in both the refinement of web accessibility standards and the active enforce-

ment of such standards by the DOJ. Because of the DOJ's active enforcement, private litigation has increased.

The current standards to which organizations are being held accountable are WCAG 2.1 AA. You may have heard of Section 508 web accessibility standards, which were less comprehensive than WCAG. WCAG 2.1 AA standards are now being adopted as Section 508 requirements.

Accessibility standards and enforcement of those standards is still a developing area; however there is no doubt that any business or organization website should take measures now to ensure their website is accessible according to WCAG 2.1 AA.

The American Bar Association states: *Businesses with public-facing websites should develop and implement a plan to conform core website functions to WCAG 2.1 within a reasonable time. They should also make accessibility a part of their website development process by training employees and building internal expertise. Businesses that rely on outside vendors for web development should ensure that their contracts include appropriate representations and warranties for conformance with prevailing web accessibility standards and compliance with the ADA. They should also review all relevant insurance policies for potential coverage in the event of a claim.* (Reference: <http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/blt/2016/03/web-accessibility-201603.pdf>)

*The information contained in this report is not legal advice. If you have questions about the applicability of the referenced accessibility laws to specific situations, please consult an attorney.

DISABLED USER ACCESSIBILITY* (Continued)

Approximately 10% of the population has a disability that affects computer use. Website accessibility primarily addresses disabilities related to vision, motor skills, mobility, hearing, and seizures.

Google is blind, deaf, and can't use a mouse. Bringing a site into WCAG 2.1 AA compliance can also benefit the site's ability to be understood by all users and indexed by search engines.

Quick Facts About Web Accessibility

Needs that WCAG 2.1 AA addresses include:

1. **Visual:** Visual impairments including blindness, various common types of low vision and poor eyesight, various types of color blindness.
2. **Motor/Mobility:** For example, difficulty using or inability to use the hands, including tremors, muscle slowness, loss of fine muscle control, etc., due to conditions such as Parkinson's disease, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, stroke.
3. **Auditory:** Deafness or hearing impairments, including individuals who are hard of hearing.
4. **Seizures:** Photo epileptic seizures caused by visual strobe or flashing effects.

WCAG 2.1 AAA also addresses:

5. **Cognitive/Intellectual:** Developmental disabilities, learning disabilities (dyslexia, dyscalculia, etc.), and cognitive disabilities of various origins, affecting memory, attention, developmental "maturity," problem-solving and logic skills, etc.

Laws that Apply to Website Accessibility

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):

Governed by the Department of Justice. The goal of this law is to ensure that people with disabilities can have an equal opportunity to participate in programs, services, and activities.

Title I: Applies primarily to internal systems (intranets, CRMs, etc.).

Title III: Applies primarily to "public accommodation of people with disabilities."

The DOJ has determined that the web is a place

of public accessibility.

The standards used to enforce the ADA are WCAG 2.1 AA and apply to all businesses or organizations with websites. While the regulations apply to all, the urgency and importance of compliance varies by industry, organization type, and size.

Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Sections 504 and 508):

These regulations apply primarily to federal government organizations. Some states have adopted them also, and they apply to organizations that receive funding, subcontract to, or sell to the federal government.

WCAG 2.1 AA standards are being adopted to replace 508 standards so in effect all organizations private, public or government are subject to the same requirements. However, there is a greater sense of urgency for organizations to comply if they are in one of the categories specifically designated by section 508.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Section 255 of the Telecommunications Act of 1996

Section 508 accessibility requirements (WCAG 2.1 AA) apply to all federal government organizations, and organizations that receive funding from, contract with, or sell to the federal government.

For more information on accessibility laws see: <http://webaim.org/articles/laws/usa/>

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DISABLED USER ACCESSIBILITY* (Continued)

It's important that you select a web development vendor who is trained and experienced with WCAG 2.1 AA implementation, and you specify the requirement for WCAG validation or certification in your statement of work.

Understanding the technical implications of developing and maintaining a website that is WCAG 2.1 AA compliant.

A web development vendor will be able to code and validate against WCAG standards using tools such as Utah State University's WebAIM tool. This is the most basic method to address web accessibility, however a complete web accessibility evaluation requires human review.

There is no universal certification that a website is accessible. Unlike W3C certification for valid HTML, which can be completed entirely online, full accessibility testing requires review by accessibility experts and actual human testing by disabled individuals in a lab setting.

Caution is recommended when selecting a third party to use for site accessibility certification. There are some organizations that promote themselves as accessibility experts who may lack authority and overcharge for their services.

Utah State University's nonprofit WebAIM program is one of the longest established and most credible web accessibility organizations that provide certification services:

<http://webaim.org/services/>

WCAG compliance is an ongoing process. When new content is added or a site is modified WCAG standards must be implemented for those changes, and site certification revalidated. This presents a special area of concern for sites that are not professionally maintained and updated.

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WEBSITE DEPLOYMENT OPTIONS

User managed websites utilizing a CMS like WordPress are becoming less appealing in many situations because of the increased security risks, the increasing total cost of ownership, and the necessity of maintaining accessibility requirements throughout a website's lifetime. Professionally managed websites can often solve those issues while providing performance benefits and a lower total cost of ownership.

User Managed via a Content Management System (CMS)

Definition: A software application that resides on your web server in which design and content are managed.

CMSs allow editing and management by personnel who are not necessarily professional web developers. Pages on a CMS website do not exist until queried by a web browser at which time they are assembled. The most popular CMS is WordPress, followed by Joomla and Drupal.

The primary selling point of a CMS has traditionally been that it enables website owners without detailed technical knowledge to keep their site up-to-date without having to outsource the work to a developer.

Professionally Managed Website

Definition: A website that is managed by a professional developer, either internal or contracted. Applications similar to a CMS are used to globally manage a site's design and content; however, the process is completed locally (not on the web server), and the site's pages, design, and content are uploaded to the server upon completion.*

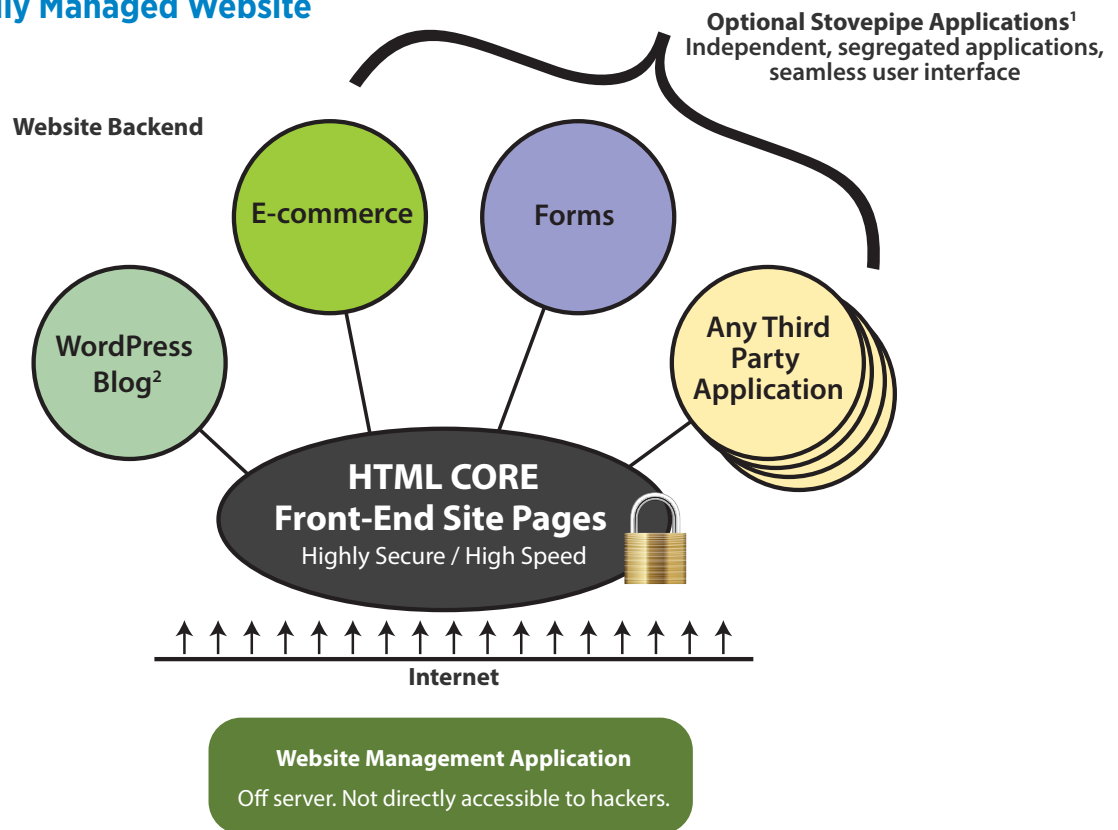
The primary selling points of professionally managed websites are 1) higher quality control, 2) web accessibility and SEO integrity are better maintained, 3) the risk of the site being hacked is greatly reduced, 4) the site owner's time is freed up to focus on core business functions, and 5) a lower total cost of ownership.

For case studies comparing the two options see: <https://www.netlify.com/case-studies/>

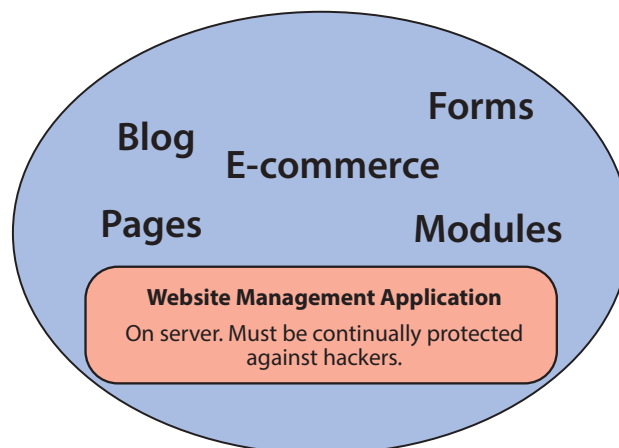
* This definition will apply to the phrase "professionally managed website" throughout this report. There is no industry standard definition of the phrase.

WEBSITE DEPLOYMENT OPTIONS (Continued)

Professionally Managed Website



User Managed Website via Content Management System



Apps and core site are not segregated.

The software application that manages the site is on the server, and open to attack by hackers.

1. A stovepipe application is an application that executes and operates as a stand-alone program in the backend. It does not share resources and is not integrated with any other application. This prevents systemic global failures, i.e., an attack or failure of one component does not cause a cascading failure of the entire website. Backend stovepipe applications provide more versatility and scalability long-term for site management while allowing for a seamless user experience.

2. WordPress and other dynamic applications can be fully utilized within a site's structure backend and a seamless user experience provided. For best security, stability, and site performance these applications should be segregated and configured to serve their optimal function. For example, WordPress should be used just for the blog section of a site, e-commerce applications just for the store section of the site, etc.

WEBSITE DEPLOYMENT OPTIONS (Continued)

Professionally Managed Website

Security

- **Protected application code.** Core HTML pages eliminate the vast majority of vulnerability points for hackers since the website management application is not accessible to them.
- **Distributed failure points.** An attack on the blog or other dynamic component cannot take down the other segments of the site.
- **Scalability and versatility maximized** for future development and third-party service or app integration.
- **Simple disaster recovery.** No database or application restoration required. Decreases the risk of downtime and lost content.

Hosting and maintenance

- **Standard hosting.** Deployable on any tier 1 shared or dedicated hosting provider with no additional services other than standard/baseline security. There are no compulsory application updates for the core pages of the site. Many stovepipe applications are on fully managed platforms. However, some stovepipe applications will need to be updated periodically.

User Managed (CMS)

- vs. • **Vulnerable application code.** Application code resides on a web server accessible to hackers. CMS code is open source; hackers have full access to find vulnerabilities. Reliance on third-party modules increases risk.
- vs. • **Single point of failure.** All applications are stacked; if one fails, the risk of a chain reaction taking down the entire site is greater.
- vs. • **Limits for scalability and versatility.** Commitment to an application framework like WP may restrict options down the road.
- vs. • **Disaster recovery is more complex** and can involve repairs to database and application. CMSs require additional monthly service cost to provide disaster recovery protection.
- **Managed hosting.** Managed WordPress hosting (for example) is required to push frequent core application updates and malware protection.
- **Security services required.** WordFence and potentially Sucuri or comparable services.
- **Module updates.** Modules are developed by third parties and will need to be updated independently with proper measures taken for disaster recovery during the process.
- **Theme updates.** Themes may need to be updated by a developer or replaced over time due to incompatibilities with future core application releases.

Site updates and content management

- **Developer updates.** Client submits requested changes to development vendor by email or via an online form. Vendors typically complete updates within 24 hrs with rush requests available.
- vs. • **Client content updates.** Client users log into the application and make content updates themselves. Some updates that include design or layout changes may still require the services of a professional developer.

Website consistency, optimization, and accessibility compliance

- **Web accessibility maintenance.** A web developer can ensure accessibility compliance is maintained at each site update.
- vs. • **Web accessibility maintenance.** Client users will need to be trained on web accessibility and the tools to test each update for accessibility. Developer assistance for compliance may be needed.
- **Brand/style consistency.** Design development professionals can ensure brand standards and styles are consistently maintained at high levels through the site's life cycle.
- vs. • **Risk of brand/style inconsistency.** Updates by multiple and/or nontechnical users can result in inconsistent styling and design.
- **Page load time optimization.** Images and documents optimized to maintain optimal load times.
- vs. • **Increased likelihood of decreased page load times.** Nonoptimized uploaded images and documents often produce significant increases in page load times.
- **Code integrity/SEO continuity.** SEO expertise to ensure optimization is maintained after site updates.
- vs. • **Risk of code integrity and SEO degradation.** All client users may not have the expertise to maintain optimal conditions.

Total cost of ownership

- **Initial design and development.** CMS sites typically have a ~20% higher cost to design/develop.*
- **Hosting and security software.** CMS sites typically have ~50% higher cost for ongoing hosting and security.*

The total cost of ownership comparison between a website managed with by a professional developer and a site deployed on a content management system with non-developer content managers can vary significantly based on many factors. Generally speaking, however, the total cost of ownership for a professionally managed website, whether from a vendor or an in-house developer, is often lower while at the same time offering significant benefits including:

- **A reduction of risk from hacking** and the potentially large costs of lost business, reputation, and disaster recovery.
- **Continuity of WCAG 2.1 AA compliance** providing a wider audience and reducing the risk of complaints and legal action.
- **Marketing message and style consistency** for more effective brand representation.
- **W3C code validation continuity** to ensure your website displays properly for all users.
- **Continuity of on-site SEO best practices.**
- **Maintaining optimal page-load times.** Note, this is a very common problem with user-managed CMS sites; images and uploaded documents are not optimized for size resulting in slow page downloads which in turn increases bounce rates and negatively affect SEO.
- **The reduction of human resource opportunity cost.** Assuming the staff previously tasked with website content updating has the opportunity to spend that time instead on their specialized business focus.

Each situation is different and in some cases, a combination of staff managed sections on a stovepipe section of a website (see page 16) working in conjunction with a core professionally managed website may provide the most efficiency. The other important factor is the professional web developer or team, must possess the necessary expertise and knowledge in the areas mentioned above to reduce risk and total cost of ownership. An RFP and statement of work should specify in detail the all requirements for a professional developer that affect total cost of ownership.

**Note: These cost comparison percentages are common, realistic estimates. However, individual projects may have unique needs and requirements; the price percentages should not be taken literally for all projects. The important point is a total cost of ownership analysis should be part of every web development project.*

SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING

Even if demand generation from search engines is not a priority, implementing best practice on-site SEO for a new website should be mandatory because the cost is nominal and on-site SEO practices provide usability and accessibility benefits.

Terminology

Search Engine Marketing (SEM)

The process of gaining traffic and visibility from search engines and social media services through both paid and unpaid efforts; it can include search engine optimization (SEO), pay per click (PPC), as well as related marketing tactics such as Google's remarketing.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

SEO focuses on increasing website traffic and visibility "organically," i.e., without explicitly paying for individual ads. There are two areas of SEO:

On-Site SEO

Optimal setup of a website and its server to ensure that search engines have full access, and can understand and index a site's content. Note: On-Site SEO is the only portion of SEM directly controlled by your website's developer and content manager.

Off-Site SEO

Marketing efforts with the intention of developing backlinks from credible/authoritative sites in the same or complementary industries to increase the authority of a website, thus increasing the likelihood it will list higher in the organic listings on a search engine result page (SERP).

Pay Per Click (PPC), e.g., Google AdWords

Short advertisements that are displayed to search engine users based on the keywords you specify. PPC ads are typically displayed above the organic listings on a SERP. The price you pay is determined by bidding on your desired keywords. The more competition for your keywords the higher the bid price. You pay only when a user clicks on your ad, after which they are directed to a landing page you specify to continue the sales process.

Google AdWords Remarketing (aka Ad Retargeting)

Remarketing is the use of cookies to track those users who have visited your website and presenting those users with ads, when possible, on other websites they visit. You only pay when a user clicks on those ads, but all the impressions up until then are free. Remarketing is a powerful and effective tool because it creates multiple impressions with your prospects well after they've left your site.

Search Engine Results Page (SERP)

The results page a search engine displays after a search term is entered. A SERP includes results for both organic results (unpaid / via SEO) as well as sponsored results (the product of PPC). Also, SERPs may contain elements such as Google's Instant Answers, Google Local listings, Google Maps listings, as well as other elements. The space and prevalence of organic results on Google SERPs have been decreasing over time as more SERP space continues to be allocated to PPC and other features.

SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING (Continued)

SEO

Consistent, reliable, and predictable demand generation using only SEO has become increasingly difficult due to the massive amount of content on the Internet. It can be most effective for sites with a large amount of well-targeted content, or for sites with very specific targets. For example, the keyword “dentist” would be extremely difficult and costly to generate demand using SEO, whereas the keywords “dentist, implants, Chiloquin Oregon” would be relatively easy and inexpensive.

For any website, there is no reason on-site SEO best practices should not be implemented. The cost is low, and proper on-site optimization helps ensure the best readability for users and includes some crossover benefits for web accessibility. However, for many sites, returns on SEO demand generation quickly diminish due to the high cost of writing and publishing high-quality content on a continual basis. The amount, quality, and frequency of such content is the primary long-term determiner of a site’s authority and thus higher SERP listing.

Another major problem with using SEO for demand generation is that organic SERP listings are controlled by the ever changing and proprietary criteria of Google and other search engines and can be subject to subterfuge by competitors. You never have control or assurance that your current SERP listings will not change and you have no direct control over the process. For example, major updates by Google of their criteria have resulted in dramatic changes in SERP listings almost overnight.

Paid SEM (PPC and Remarketing)

Paid SEM offers the benefits of speed, control, testing, and predictability. Any website can pay to immediately bypass the years their competitor may have invested in establishing their SERP listing.

Paid SEM puts campaign control directly into the hands of an organization rather than subjecting it to the determination of a third party, and allows fine-tuning and testing with almost immediate results for adjustments, optimizing a campaign so that a cost per impression and return on investment can be calculated.

Paid SEM takes advantage of the trend of search engines to provide more prominence on SERPs to paid listings and offers opportunities to expand your demand generation off just your website.

Paid SEM takes a significant financial commitment over time for success, which is also true for SEO. Paid SEM campaigns have the disadvantage of not directly building a site’s authority or establishing SEO equity. A year’s worth of SEO strategy would build equity whereas when a paid SEM campaign ends there is no direct equity built. However, increased paid traffic to a site can indirectly benefit SEO depending on the perceived value of the content on a site from those visitors who may in turn reference the site, producing organic backlinks.

Because it’s a common question, be aware that Google AdWords does not allow you to hijack search traffic for your competitor’s name or product names (assuming they are trademarked).

SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING (Continued)

Which is best, organic search engine optimization or paid search marketing?

This question is irrelevant if the messaging, usability, and value of your website are not first fine-tuned. Your website should be structured with only your prospects and users in mind (not search engines) so that it concisely presents your value proposition, firmly establishes your credibility, addresses potential objections, and provides an effortless path through your sales cycle. When a site's messaging and content is optimized for your human prospects and users, you will have created the type of high-quality site that Google wants to provide its customers.

When considering where to put your time and resources into demand generation, it's important not to lose sight of the big picture. There may be other lower-cost opportunities to generate visitors utilizing resources that exist within your organization already, or it may be more cost effective for you to put resources into other marketing avenues.

With those considerations in mind, where and how to generate demand through search engines will depend first on how sought after your prospects are by other entities. Your competition will include your direct competi-

tors as well as use by any other industry of your keywords. Unique, low competition, and "long tail" (a part number for example) keywords tend to provide more opportunities for SEO, whereas highly competitive keywords may favor paid SEM.

The best approach will often be a combination of SEO and paid SEM. As mentioned earlier, for all sites there is no reason not to employ on-site SEO regardless of any other factor. In most cases, hiring a reputable and objective consultant to help you map out a strategy and implement a plan will result in a higher return on your investment. Even if you have a web developer on staff, engaging a consultant who is a subject matter expert to provide guidance can be well worth it. Be aware also that there are hordes of predators who market themselves as SEO experts and look to capitalize on misconceptions. The most easily identifiable ones are those who market by spam or phone calls; if they really were SEM experts they would be marketing themselves through search engines. However, even those who do market themselves through other channels should not necessarily be taken at face value. Look for a partner who has been in the business for years and who can provide customer references.

CONCLUSION

By adhering to the established best practices in this report, your website can be a more effective component of your marketing communications arsenal. These best practices and trends, when implemented during the development of a new site, will not necessarily increase project cost significantly, but can provide substantial returns.

Addressing the emerging requirements and threats, such as accessibility and security, can ensure you reach more people and avoid disasters.

Key takeaways from this report:

- Your website must exist within the context of your overall brand and strategy and have well-defined goals to be effective (pages 3–4).
- At least 50% of your website budget should focus on messaging and content (page 5).
- Develop your website from your users' perspectives (pages 6–7).
- Understand and implement established business design principles to provide credibility to your organization through marketing communications (page 8).
- Review the 2017 website trends and best practices to understand current requirements and preferences of users (pages 9–10).
- The threat of hacking continues to increase and can be offset by enhancing your CMS or replacing it with a professionally managed site (page 11).
- Web accessibility is a trending concern, which is on track to revolutionize company websites. Be aware you are legally required to provide accessible sites. Evaluate your risk, and the degree of compliance warranted based on your organization type and industry (pages 12–14).
- Understand the pros and cons of user managed vs. professionally managed websites and ensure the deployment option you select fully addresses your needs and requirements (pages 15–17).
- Even if search engine demand generation is not a priority for your website, understanding and implementing best practice on-site SEO during development will provide benefits and should not increase your project cost (pages 18–20).



About Risingline

Founded in 2006, Risingline is a forward-thinking marketing and web technology consultancy and service provider helping our clients intelligently, efficiently, and cost-effectively leverage resources to promote their brand and deliver value to their customers. Our clientele includes large corporations, nonprofit organizations, and emerging brands.

We engage with clients as both an expert advisor and auditor for work being performed internally or provided by third parties and in separate engagements as a direct provider of services.

Our areas of expertise include the following:

- Website accessibility ADA compliance (WCAG 2.2 AA)
- Website development, deployment, and management
- Search engine marketing strategy
- Copywriting and content management
- Web security
- Project management
- Branding and graphic design
- Advertising including digital, print, and display

For more information on our capabilities and services, please contact us at info@risingline.com or visit www.risingline.com.

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