

Special Report
Ten Ways Your Website is Broken
(And What You Can Do to Fix It!)

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Great web sites since 1998.

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Abstract

What kind of shape is your website in? Does it just sit there? Do you get any business from it? Is it broken? You must be at least a little discouraged or else you wouldn't have downloaded this report. We discuss 10 common mistakes that negatively affect the success of a website. Additionally we provide improvement suggestions and a list of helpful resources.

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Dear Fellow Webmaster,

Owning a website is tough business. It's especially frustrating if you don't see the results you would like. My own website used to be boring and not at all useful to myself or my visitors - or lack thereof. In this report, I'd like to share with you some of what I learned in the past seven years by designing and maintaining websites.

I find that there are ten common mistakes that website owners make. The good news is that many of these problems are easy to correct with little or no professional help. Before we get started, let me tell you what the top ten website mistakes are.

1. You provide no content for the visitor.
2. Things move or blink.
3. There's too much stuff on one page.
4. The purpose of your web site is unclear.
5. Visitors can't find what they're looking for.
6. There is no call to action.
7. Search engines are oblivious to your existence.
8. Your contact information is buried.
9. Your web site does not look professional.
10. Your web site is too difficult to maintain.

It's easy to make
your website more
effective once you
know what to do!

Does any of this sound familiar? I can honestly say that I've made all of these mistakes except for #2 and I've just recently corrected #10. For more information or to ask a question about this report, visit Advanced Web Design <http://www.advancedwebdesign.com>. Good luck!

Sincerely,

Jolene Pirrone

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Mistake #1: You Provide No Content for the Visitor

“But Jolene, I have dozens of pages on my site,” you say. Pages do not necessarily provide content. And not all content that you may (or may not) provide is of any use to your visitors. Let’s consider the old standby “About Us” page. Do you have one? Why? It may be wonderfully fascinating in it’s own way, but is it helping your visitors answer their questions or solve their problems.

When developing content, the focus must always be on the visitor. Internet users are looking for ***their*** content, ***not*** yours.

Let’s face it - Internet users are browsing around, looking for answers to their questions and/or solutions to their problems. If you’re not providing that, what are you doing? Most visitors are not going to invest the time to read the lengthy history of your business. Stating your qualifications and experience can be as simple as the tag line, “Manufacturing Great Widgets Since 1984”.

Rather than jabber on about yourself, consider offering one or more of the following:

- Informative articles about a topic of concern in today’s world
- Resources to answer a question that many folks ask
- Ways to save money
- Great deals on a particular product or service
- A way to help others

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Mistake #2: Things Move or Blink

Back in 1998, this used to refer to those annoying little animated .gifs that everyone was so fond of, yet everyone hated. While there are still animated email buttons out there in remote corners of the web, this error nowadays refers to the *overuse* of Flash animation.

Let me be clear from the start. Flash is not web design and vice versa. There are only so many legitimate reasons to have anything move on a web site. Consider the most popular web sites out there. Google, Yahoo!, Amazon... Does much of anything move or blink? Surely that suggests something.

One good use of movement is link “hover” effects. A user puts their mouse over a link and it changes in some way. This let’s the visitors know it’s a link and that they have successfully found it with the mouse. This type of effect can be accomplished with traditional HTML and CSS. Another possible use of animation is to create a game if your website were entertainment related.

Appropriate use of animation does *not* include Flash intros.

Appropriate use of animation does *not* include that tacky Flash intro that you spent too much money on, that everyone skips anyway. You did provide a skip button, didn’t you?

“What about banners, Jolene?” What about them? Do they have to move? I don’t know. I’m not inclined to click on a banner advertising a “free college degree” whether it moves or not. A well-designed banner that advertises a useful product or service doesn’t need to move.

Although, I suppose it could.

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Mistake #3: There's Too Much Stuff on One Page

I hate to scroll. Don't you? Anything of importance on any given web page should appear in the browser window without scrolling. That includes your logo, primary headings, some content and the menu. If what appears in the window does not capture the visitor's attention, what makes you think they're going to scroll down to see the rest.

Which brings me to the dreaded, never-ending article. Is this you? Try to keep content pages to 500 words or less. If you find that you need to write more, create a separate page. There's only so long that folks are going to want to sit there spinning their mouse wheel to read your text.

Another problem some folks run into is a crowded page. There's so much text and so many images and buttons that nobody knows where to click. Using lot of graphics is not the way to improve a website that offers nothing of value. Let's go back to the Google example.

Remember mistake #1? What are users looking for? A bunch of pictures? Unless your website is a photo gallery, the answer is no. So what's the solution?

"Enough is as good as a feast." -*Mary Poppins*

Remember KISS? In other words, "keep it simple stupid". A nice picture can illustrate a concept or add interest to a news story. Research shows that pictures of people are especially effective. Use graphics that will help convey the information your users are looking for. Place a chart in an article about a medicine. Include a portrait of the person who is going to be speaking at your event. Add a snapshot of the product you are reviewing. You get the idea.

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Mistake #4: The Purpose of Your Web Site is Unclear

What is the purpose of your website? Notice that I use the singular. Think real hard and try to come up with the single most important reason that your website exists. Is it to generate sales leads? Sell a product directly? Get subscriptions to a newsletter? Let folks browse your real estate listings?

Whatever answer you came up with, every part of your website needs to be focused on that purpose. Yes, everything. For the sake of discussion, think of one of the pages on your website. Any page. Does it sell a product? Does it get people to call you? No? Change it or remove it.

If you don't know what your website is all about, how will anyone else figure it out?

Now what about that heading? What about that picture? Too many webmasters throw a bunch of text and graphics on a page without a whole lot of thought as to what they're trying to accomplish. Is that you?

If the purpose of your website is unclear to you, it's probably not very clear to your visitors. That could be the reason that you don't get many leads from your website.

Another problem arises when your website content is all over the place like cards on the floor in a game of 52 pick-up - search engine failure. If you don't know what the heck your website is about and visitors don't know what the heck your website is about, then how is Google going to know what the heck your website is about?

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Mistake #5: Visitors Can't Find What They're Looking For

This horrible error can take two distinct forms.

Firstly, the words “click here” couldn't be more vague. Which is more helpful? “Click Here” or “Read our review of Drupal 4.6”. Nowhere is it written that link text has to be three words or less. Go ahead and let visitors know what they're going to find right up front.

Next is the non-descript button. The little picture thereupon may be cute, but you can't assume that visitors are going to know what you meant by putting it there. Worse yet, there's nothing on the button until you put your mouse over it. Cool, huh? Well, no not really. Not if you are losing visitors.

Browsing your
website should
not feel like
walking around
in a dark room.

You have such a narrow window of time in which to convince your visitors to stick around. You'd better serve up their options in clear, eloquent way before they decide to go elsewhere.

You may not realize how much link text affects the search engines. The link structure within your website as well as outbound links make a big impact on search engine ranking. Yes, linking to *another website* with informative link text can get *your website* a better position in the search engines.

- Books or Books on Gardening
- Gifts or Gifts for the Garden Lover
- Products or Garden Related Products

Which website, in your estimation, (left or right) will rank higher for the term “garden”? Add a few outbound links that read, “Article About Garden Pests” and “Gardening with Kids Website” and you just might be on the right track.

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Mistake #6: There's No Call to Action

So what do you want your visitors to do when they get to your website. Do you even know? If not, you can be sure that they don't know. If you want them to contact you, which is what most webmasters want, don't make them look for a method to do so.

Go ahead and ask for what you want. This request could be as simple as "Download Our New 15 Page Report". Sound familiar? Obviously it works because you're reading this now.

You may want to consider having the "method of action" on the same page as your "call to action". For example:

- If you want folks to call, have your number in **big bold letters** next to the polite words, "Call today to find out how much you can save."
- If you would prefer that visitors request a catalog, put a small form **right on the front page** of your website under the heading, "Send us your address and we'll rush you our catalog."

You get the idea. Make it easy on your visitors and be clear about things up front.

Don't be afraid to ask visitors to do what it is you want them to do.

Your call to action doesn't have to be carved in stone. Go ahead and test it. If you feel like you're not getting a sufficient response, change the wording of your request. Move it higher on the page. Use color to make it stand out. Evaluate the change over one month. Any difference? Play around with it until you get results.

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Mistake #7: Search Engines are Oblivious to Your Existence

A lot of folks ask me, “How do I get in Google so someone can push a button and get to my website?” Many continue with, “My friend said you had to put a lot of keywords in the meta tags.” No, not exactly.

There’s so much to the search engine game that it’s beyond the scope of this document. Maybe that will be my next report entitled,

“How to Get Someone to Push a Button on Google and Get to Your Website.”

Seriously now. The one most important thing you can do, besides fix mistake #1, is to get some links to your website from quality sources. Let me tell you what I mean by quality.

We’ve all heard about quality over quantity. For the sake of example, getting a link from a pharmaceutical website to your real estate website is ***not*** quality. In fact this is a good way to confuse any given search engine and rank for neither “pharmaceutical” nor “real estate”. Pharm websites are quite eager to trade links with any Tom, Dick and Harry who owns a website, which can be tempting. But you must resist.

And please, don’t spam the search engines. Submitting every month or so to 100 search engines really wont accomplish anything. As soon as you get another website to link to yours, the bots will follow or spider that link and list you automatically. There’s really no need to submit anything.

The best place to look for linking opportunities is to search on Google for ***your keywords “add a site”*** or ***your keywords “directory”***. The “your keywords” being any combination of keywords that you wish to target. Any incarnation thereof will yield lists of related websites that would b happy to link to you.

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Mistake #8: Your Contact Information is buried

A “contact page” isn’t the only place for contact information. Who says your email address, phone number or even a contact form can’t be on the front page? Web designers are guilty of this misconception because they often sell a contact page as a separate entity.

Web designers are guilty of leading people to believe that a contact page is something separate from the rest of a web site.

Many large corporations are the greatest offenders. You have to click several times to find their phone number, *if* you find it at all. I suppose they feel that they are big enough that visitors will go through the effort. The rest of us don’t have that luxury. We have to make it very easy for folks to contact us or they will call our competitor.

“What about spam, Jolene?” you ask. Yes, spam is a huge problem. Putting your mail address out there puts you at risk of being put on a spammers contact list. The easiest solution is to use a contact form. You can have such a form on any page of your website. There’s no functional reason why a form needs a separate page.

Another way to provide your email without letting spammers get it is to use a button or graphic as an email link. Please, for the love of Pete, don’t make it blink, rotate, flip or otherwise move. It could just be a picture of your email address in text.

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Mistake #9: Your Web Site Does Not Look Professional

There's something to be said for do-it-yourself people. Unfortunately, web design is not a skill that Johnny Q. Public is very good at. You may find that you have to part with a few dollars if you want to have a website that:

- Is easily navigated
- Conveys a good image of you
- Earns visitors' respect
- Is search engine friendly
- Sells your product or service effectively

Do you do your own plumbing? Rather than spend a lot of time and money only to be disappointed, consider investing in professional services. I hear cries of, "You're just saying that because you're a professional!"

That's exactly right. I know first-hand what kind of skills, time and effort goes into designing a great website. And I can't imagine how the layperson would manage it with their business to run and family to take care of besides.

For the cost of Microsoft Front Page, you can get a professional to design a web site without those evil themes. Unless you're a web designer, your web site is not full-time employment; you have a business to run.

Quality doesn't cost. It Pays.

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Mistake #10: Your Web Site is Too Difficult to Maintain

For a long time, my website was too difficult to maintain and I'm a professional! There's nothing worse than adding an article only to go through 12 other pages and add the link to the menu of each one. Then when you refresh, everything is topsy-turvy because you made a mistake somewhere. But where? Yikes!

A good content management system allows for growth.

If you have to call your web designer every time you add a page and it takes them two weeks or more and costs \$200 a pop, how likely is it that your website will be current? In that case, what's the point? You can maintain your own website with a content management system (CMS).

There's nothing like lots of fresh, interesting content to get traffic and keep it. Anyone with basic computer skills can add a news story or page to their website. In other words, anyone with basic computer skills can get website traffic and keep it. The trick is to get the CMS set up in the first place.

You may or may not need help setting up your CMS website. Likely, you'll need to make the initial investment in professional services to install, configure and design your template. The good news is that there are many good CMS software packages - that are free. And free is our friend!

The initial development costs may seem high, but consider the long-term advantages. You'll have good-looking web site with lots of wonderful content that you've added yourself and you won't have to call your web designer for a long time. Unless, of course, you want to.

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Top Ten Website Fixes

1. Provide lots of useful content to others and quit going on about yourself. You'll put folks to sleep if you're not careful.
2. Keep your website design simple and squeaky-clean. You want to be able to find your shoes in your closet and visitors want to be able to find stuff on your website.
3. Use a logical system of website navigation. Keep it across the top or down the left-hand side where folks will be expecting it.
4. Keep imagery to a minimum. Use pictures to add something useful or enhance your content.
5. Keep a method of contact front and center at all times. Include a phone number, email link or contact form handy at all times.
6. Don't bother with Flash.
7. Identify your website's purpose and gear everything - every header, every picture every word - towards accomplishing that purpose.
8. Consider using a content management solution to facilitate adding all that wonderful content you've started developing to your website.
9. Go ahead and tell visitors what you want from them whether it be to pick up the phone, or subscribe to your newsletter or buy your products.
10. Get links from similar websites and directories to make sure the search engines find you. If you provide good content, someone will search and find your website.

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Webmaster Resources

Webmaster World - Discussion for the independent web professional. A forum community. <http://www.webmasterworld.com>

Drupal - Community Plumbing. A PHP/MySQL based content management system. <http://www.drupal.org>

Zen Cart - The Art of E-Commerce. A PHP/MySQL based e-commerce solution. <http://www.zen-cart.com>

EyeTrack III - What You Most Need to Know. A research study into Internet user behavior. <http://www.poynterextra.org/eyetrack2004/main.htm>

26 Steps to 15K a Day - Successful Site in 12 Months with Google Alone. A guide to creating websites. <http://www.searchengineworld.com/misc/guide.htm>

Sourceforge - The largest repository of Open Source code and applications available on the Internet. <http://sourceforge.net>

OpenSourceCMS - Try before your install. Demo site for open source and Content Management Systems. <http://www.opensourcecms.com>

Magnet4Web - Increasing your net profit. Internet marketing and website marketing promotion services. <http://www.magnet4web.com>

Google Information for Webmasters - Guide to getting indexed and found by Google. <http://www.google.com/webmasters>

DMOZ - The Open Directory Project. The largest human edited directory on the Internet. <http://dmoz.org>

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More Webmaster Resources

SitePoint - New Articles, Fresh Thinking for Web Developers and Designers. Articles, books, blogs and forums. <http://www.sitepoint.com/>

Web Pages that Suck - Learn usability and good web design by looking at bad web design. <http://www.webpagesthatsuck.com/>

Newark1 - Web design company that has interesting articles on design color, form and order. Good tips section. <http://www.newark1.com/>

MeyerWeb - Cascading style sheets (CSS) gallery, tutorials and resources by Eric Meyer. <http://www.meyerweb.com/eric/css>

World Wide Web Consortium - Leading the web to its full potential. Interesting features include a CSS and HTML validation. <http://www.w3.org/>

Web Page Design for Designers - Articles, reviews and information about the graphic design of Web sites. <http://www.wpdfd.com/>

Taming the Beast - Free Internet marketing resources, web site development tutorials & software solutions. <http://www.tamingthebeast.net/>

Jesett.net - Creating a web site. A step-by-step guide. An aesthetically pleasing and user-friendly web design guide. <http://www.jesett.com/>

10 Web Usability Tips - 10 Usability Principles to guide you through the Web Design Maze. <http://www.humanfactors.com/downloads/10tips.asp>

Rules of Website Promotion - Set of promotion rules. Not very recent, but still accurate. <http://www.searchengineworld.com/tips/rules.htm>