

Nine things you should avoid when building your website

1 Put too much personalization on the home-page.

Though you certainly want to create a personal experience and establish a relationship with your site visitors, having a picture of yourself on the home-page may be distracting and create the impression that your site is more amateur than professional. The point of your site is to offer solutions and benefits to users—it's about them, not about you. As we said earlier, there is an appropriate place for more personalized information—the “About Us” page.

2 Be too flashy.

It's simple, actually: Simplicity pays. You don't want to overwhelm visitors (especially on your home-page) with fancy or poorly produced Flash presentations, tons of irrelevant pictures, or needless audio or video. Net users are impatient; they hate sitting around waiting for a site to load. So while you think your bells and whistles will win you accolades for creativity, if they're overdone, they are in fact stopping many potential visitors from ever getting to your home-page. And yes, we know more people are using broadband services, but that's still no excuse for you to overload your site.

3 Create option overload.

Again, remember to keep it simple. Your site structure shouldn't offer an overwhelming choice of places to go. That just confuses people and distracts them from your primary message. Think about what you want them to do once they get to your site. If they can't decide where to click, they'll just leave. Give visitors up to five navigational choices for going deeper into your site. This is not to say you can't have supporting pages augmenting your basic information. But allow your visitors to dig deeper without cluttering up your pages, making them confusing and slow to load. Using a “Learn More” link to lead them to the supporting pages can be effective and help reduce page clutter.

4 Neglect to fill security gaps.

You need to be as vigilant about checking your site for security and privacy violations as hackers and spammers are when they're searching for sites to break into. Start with a reputable web hosting company, and double-check that they have security measures in place to protect your and your customers' data (assuming, of course, that you maintain this data on your site or within your intranet). If you keep sensitive information about your business practices, strategic partners, customers or clients, and vendors and suppliers anywhere online, then hire an expert to check out your site to make sure everything is properly secured.

5 Include obtrusive advertising.

Online advertising has been going through a bit of a revival. You may want to join in by adding advertising to your site. That's OK, as long as you keep it relatively low-profile. That means no annoying pop-ups. Also, don't clutter your pages with ads all over the place. Flashing, blinking, bouncing ads will send your web visitors running. Pick one compact area on each page to run your

ads. Also make sure the ads you run are relevant to your customers and your business. Inappropriate ads (selling Viagra if you're an accountant, for example) are distract-ing and can damage your credibility.

6 Use jargon.

Unless you're running a site for a specific industry or catering to a very narrow target audience, don't use industry lingo. Some people think talking in techno-speak or using lots of industry jargon makes them seem like they have the inside scoop. Instead, it just turns off potential customers. They might be afraid to do business with you for fear they'll never understand you. Remember, the point of your website is to tell people what you do and convince them to do business with you. Always speak appropriately to your audience. In some cases, this means taking a conversational tone; in others, you will need to sound more formal.

7 Forget to keep it real.

Your website is not an ad. Yes, it's your site, but as we said in Tip 1, it's not all about you. You should use testimonials and promote your press coverage, but there's a fine line between informing and boasting. Don't cross it.

8 Chatter too much.

Online chats that aren't moderated are a recipe for disaster. There's too much that can possibly go wrong, and the potential payoff isn't worth it. If you want to have a more interactive relationship with your site's visitors, try starting a company blog instead. Blogs are easier to control than chats. (See "In With the New" on page 17 for more on blogs.) If you want to offer visitors a way to instantly get in touch, you might consider sharing your IM screen name. Another way to help cultivate relationships and build credibility with prospective customers or cement those with existing clients is to offer webinars.

9 Leave bad links and outdated material posted.

Just because you've launched your website doesn't mean the hard work is over. You don't want to create a negative impression of your site or your business by having broken links, outdated information or irrelevant content. Check your site regularly and make the appropriate updates.