AIA Best Practices:
The principal's guide to responsive website design

Summary

Your website is potentially the most underutilized business development and validation tool in your practice. But are you doing everything you could to leverage this opportunity? While a successful website could range from a single landing page, to hundreds of pages deep, a site that uniquely positions your firm, your expertise, and your people is invaluable.

The website's role in marketing

It's kind of nostalgic to think that not so long ago, some firms probably debated the necessity of having a website. Chances are your firm evolved from that first website, to an all-Flash site, to a content management system (CMS) where your team could updated content as-needed.

Now most firms would list their website as one of their most valuable marketing and business development touch-points.

Generation X continues to move into management and leadership positions, and millennials are pouring into the workforce. The result? Today's owners, influencers, and decision makers are more digital native than ever before. That means your website is easily the most readily available research and validation tool your prospects have at their disposal.

As search engines, smart phones, and tablets become the norm for doing business, it's not just that that the people have changed, the tools are changing as well.

Many firms are embracing the idea that their website should have a key role in converting website traffic to real business development opportunities. Is your website ready for what's next?

To help you navigate the latest trends, and determine if your website is ready for an overhaul, here are the top ten things to consider.

1. Responsive Design

Without a doubt, responsive web design is one of the biggest recent changes to how websites are being built. If you're not familiar with this approach, responsive sites allow the layout, content, navigation, and other features to adjust, scale, move, or respond based on the visitor's device, based on the size of that device. To put that another way, firms leveraging responsive design can deliver an optimized experience to visitors,

regardless of whether they're using desktop, laptop, tablet, or one of many mobile phone devices. In addition, responsive websites enable marketers to manage their website content for all devices in one place—no more updating the desktop version, then updating the mobile version.

Responsive design expands far beyond making a site mobile-friendly. It's also about how the code is written and organized. Consideration should be made for offering multiple image sizes for various devices, retina displays, slower connection speeds. Responsive sites are lightweight and load quickly on mobile devices, even with slower internet connections.

Google is also playing favorites when it comes to sites that are optimized for the mobile web. Each of these tactics not only speed up your site's performance, but also decreases your long-term site maintenance costs.

With an increasing amount of traffic originating on mobile devices, some are taking a mobile first approach, meaning that the design of the website is considered first from a mobile perspective, and those design considerations drive the desktop experience.

If you're planning to redesign your website, don't do it until you're ready to invest in a responsive website.

2. Positioning and differentiation

The next key consideration in your website redesign has nothing to do with code or technology—it's simply about how you choose to position and differentiate your firm. Think about the last time you were shopping an item online. You probably did a search, clicked the first link, and spent about two seconds determining if this site had the item you were searching for. One, two… back button. Does your current website pass the two-second test? And if so, once you begin to dig into the content, does it position your firm differently than your competition?

Once your website has successfully passed the two-second test, does it successfully differentiate your firm? With many competing firms, if we simply cover up the logos on their websites there would very little remaining to differentiate them. A successful site should incorporate the firm's identity throughout the language, photography, and visual language of the site.

3. Goals and CTAs

Calls to Action (CTAs) are marketing-speak for the graphics or messages throughout your site that invite visitors to take a next step. You might want a visitor to read more, fill out a form, download a PDF, or pick up the telephone. As marketers, we work so hard to send traffic to our websites, but how many of us actually consider what we want the visitor to do once they arrive?

For each audience group who visits your website—prospect, competitor, potential employee—what is *your* goal? What would you want each of them to do when they land on your homepage, project, or blog post? And most importantly, are those goals obvious to the visitor?

4. Great photography

The web is an incredibly visual medium. As such, the quality and impact of your photography can have a marked impact on how visitors respond to your site and content.

Yes, professional photography can be expensive. But if you're teaming together with other firms for a particularly high-profile project, talk to them about hiring a professional photographer, and splitting the costs to license the images. How many truly great photos do you have of your people and projects? Here's a hint: if it was taken by one of your staff with a phone, it's probably not a great photo.

5. Elevate your people and your process

In the past, many firms may have been a little skittish to feature their key staff for the world to see. "What if someone tries to poach my best people?" But in a world where your best people are already on LinkedIn and various other social networks, there is far more benefit to allowing your prospects "meet" your team on the website first.

So while introducing prospects to your team has huge implications, describing your unique process goes a long way towards demonstrating your expertise. Feature your processes online, by name if applicable, and find a way to showcase them prominently on your site.

6. Content management system

Unless you're looking for more excuses to make requests of your IT department, a content management system (CMS) is a must-have for professional services marketers. From fully-custom software, to the ubiquitous open-source giant, WordPress, a good CMS will allow you to edit text, update images, create posts, and add projects simply and easily.

7. SEO

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) refers to the ongoing efforts of sending search traffic to your website for the right reasons, and the science of optimizing your website to be found for specific searches. The first may require ongoing consultation, but the latter is essential to take into account as you build your new site. If you understand nothing else about SEO, the key is very simple: be consistent. A page on your site with a keyword found in the page name, title, headline, and body copy is far more likely to rank for that keyword than a page that doesn't leverage consistency. And as Google's focus on mobile continues to grow, SEO and responsive web design will go hand-in-hand to improve search rankings.

8. Content marketing

Content marketing is all about sharing great content that helps your prospects solve problems, make decisions, and build affinity, without selling. Chances are your firm is already creating content on some level: writing white papers, making presentations, and answering prospect questions. Consider how you could leverage more of that content on your website. Some of the most popular content marketing approaches include: blogging, videos, podcasting, how-to lists, in-person events, and infographics.

Firms who create a culture that leverages the expertise of their subject matter experts across marketing channels, will find content marketing to be a natural extension of their brand.

9. Social Media

Beyond simply connecting with friends and colleagues, social media is also a powerful platform to share thought leadership and content marketing. Think about how the by-products of a single case study could be

leveraged as project photography on Pinterest, a client quote on LinkedIn, or a memorable phrase on Twitter, all linking back to the full case study on your website.

It's great to introduce website visitors to your various social networks, but don't get this backwards—use social media to drive traffic to your site, not to coax them away from it. When social media is overemphasized on your website, you're practically encouraging visitors to leave your site to find a new distraction.

10. CRM and marketing automation

Once your website design and content is ready to go, what if you could know specifically "who" was visiting your website, which pieces of content they were interacting with, and which tweet or link from your email marketing efforts sent them to your site? What if you could employ A/B testing to determine which call to action was most effective? As powerful marketing automation platforms and CRMs begin to work together, those things are all possible.

Conclusion

Website design best practices will always in flux. Responsive web design is a significant shift from how sites were built in the past, and the next big thing is probably equally difficult to predict. However if your new site is built with accessibility, flexibility, performance, and your firm's goals in mind, you're far more likely to have a website that will be a greatly beneficial business development tool.

About the contributor

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