Don't Kill Off the Company with a Crappy Website

Shôn Ellerton, July 23, 2024

Too many companies overlook the importance of building and maintaining a quality website and intranet.

Many years ago, I contemplated building a website for my wife's Tai Chi practice. At the time, I had little knowledge on how to build a website from scratch nor did I want to embed myself in months and months of training trying to tie together all the technical components including HTML, PHP, C#, and ASP.NET.

It was simply too hard.

Surely it's easy to do it yourself these days!

Then an open-source product calling itself Wordpress came along. Wordpress.org specifically and not to be confused with Wordpress.com.

It seemed simple enough.

All I had to do was get some shared hosting space, upload the Wordpress package, unpack it, and run it. I had to spin up a MySQL database in the hosting area, but other than that, it didn't take long to get a home page up and running.

I started the website and got the rudiments of it running. It didn't look pretty, but Wordpress had a variety of third-party themes to choose from. I chose a popular theme called Avada which came with a very small licencing cost. Out of the box, it looked presentable enough and I started to build her website. I didn't have to play around with backend coding of HTML and PHP, nor did I have to ever tinker with the underlying database. It was all drag and drop.

It was not an easy ride, however.

Apart from the task of designing the visual aspect of the website, there were the many plugins required to get it to a state that customers could schedule their events and pay online. Being open-sourced, some of the less-tested plugins fouled the whole lot, which meant having to remove them and find alternatives. There were also the security considerations, custom default settings, and many upgrades to the Wordpress core, some of which were major ones which caused chaos to the website. There were backup procedures on the website and the database which drives it. There was the painful setting up and continual maintenance of the e-mail servers. There were the various integrations into social media platforms and Mailchimp servers. And one of the most difficult aspects of building a website is to ensure compatibility across multiple browsers and screen sizes.

To further the complication, I found that shared hosting had performance issues and, not having the required permissions to do so, was unable to customise the server environment to suit the website. We, therefore, migrated over to a dedicated VPS solution which, admittedly, proved to be of superior performance, but being granted 'God rights' to make changes to the machine, care had to be taken not to mess everything up. And, of course, there is the cost of running a VPS, not to mention all the personal time I've put into maintaining the site.

To this day, I regularly need to maintain and update the website, but in general, it does what it needs to do. Compared with many other privately built websites in the same industry, it's by far, one of the best. But alas, it has taken a toll on my time and resources.

Which brings me to the point is this.

Pay some money for a professional to do it for you.

Why it's worth paying for a professional

I've been thinking about this for some time, but I've gone so far down the line in building and maintaining the website, it would come as a significant cost for someone to re-build it professionally. Especially now, given its size and complexity.

Touch wood, the website continues and will continue to work with successive upgrades, but it always feels that I'm walking around the rim of a tall smokestack, being extra careful not to make any change which causes disruption to the website.

If I start a new business, I'd be more willing to get someone to build and maintain my website. This is on the proviso that the right terms and conditions are put in place to have the site regularly maintained and updated to the business's requirements *and* have outright ownership and control of the website should I wish.

A reputable professional website builder will, in most cases, deliver a far more polished, better performing, and better user experience-based product than a website built as a side act. For example, someone running a small business repairing antique furniture with little website building knowledge could waste considerable time delivering a website of substandard quality. All for the sake of pinching a few pennies. I generalise here, but men are somewhat prone to this mode of thinking, especially in the world of DIY and house improvements!

Even large businesses are at fault for delivering exceptionally poor outward-facing websites.

And I'll tell you why this tends to happen.

Because they often want to save money and use their in-house IT teams to build them.

This very phenomenon happened to me working in the government sector.

We were working on a new upgrade for the law courts website in one of the states of Australia using, coincidentally, Wordpress and Avada, the very same combo I used to build my wife's website. It was truly a miserable affair in building a development, test, and production environment using a Microsoft platform and within an environment secured with a myriad of firewalls protecting servers only accessible through 'jump boxes', an IT term to describe logging onto virtual machines within a secure environment in which only *they* can access the production environment.

It was hellishly clunky and complicated to build.

Plugins often didn't work. Automated migration scripts frequently failed, meaning that the production environments didn't synchronise as they should do. Massive amounts of custom coding with CSS and PHP was required to solve specific issues which meant every time an upgrade happened, something would break. Another challenge was to get the data warehouses of the courts to communicate with the website platform.

Simply put, we didn't have the necessary skills in-house to deliver a polished product and, at the end of the day, our website looked and still looks inferior to those websites built in the other states.

As in the case of my wife's website, a vast amount of time and other resources were put in to revamp this website and we found ourselves in the same predicament. Basically, that we were so far into the project that to start over and use a professional service would incur significant cost.

Now, this was is in government, which it can be said, is not a world competing to look for new customers. However, in the private sector, where competition is fierce, a poor looking website can easily tarnish the value of the business, even if the product or service the business delivers is superior.

Signs of a bad outward-facing website

There are some obvious telltale signs of a poor corporate outward-facing website.

1. The inability to rapidly search for the official corporate website through a conventional search engine. It can be very frustrating trying to search for the homepage only to be bombarded with sponsored links and third-party generic amalgamation sites. Companies with common sounding names or heavily-used acronyms are most prone to being very difficult to find unless that company is exceptionally well-known or some serious SEO (search engine optimisation) workings have been put in place.

2. When the website is riddled with bad links, dead ends, missing pages, and external links which are no longer active.

3. When the website does not have a consistent feel to it in terms of typography, colour, and layout.

4. When the website is never updated. Nothing detracts more than discovering upcoming events which have already happened, or leadership profiles that no longer exist, or failing to mention anything new which should be advertised to the whole world.

5. When the link in the search engine diverts to another website, for example, when a local branch of a company immediately diverts to the global website with little or no information on the specifics of the local branch.

6. When the website is plagued with unnecessary pop-ups, flashing lights, self-starting music, and external advertising.

7. When the website is slow to load. This is usually down to bad design and/or bad choice of hosting plan.

8. When the website is not responsive, or correctly displays, on the most common types of screen sizes. For example, I've come across websites that look atrocious when viewed on a tablet but looks perfectly okay on the desktop or on a mobile phone.

9. When the website does not render properly on the most popular browsers. For example, all professional websites should be functioning properly on Chrome, Edge, and Safari.

10. And finally, if the content of the website is lacking or irrelevant. The website is the core font of information and usually the first place a prospective client will visit.

There are some smaller businesses that do not have a website at all, relying on Facebook or other social media sites as a place to advertise their wares. I would strongly recommend that any business has its own website. However, if the website is poor, then it may be best to not have one at all.

Ultimately, having a good website is so important, but what about inward-facing intranets for companies with a large base of employees.

Signs of a bad inward-facing intranet

Intranets are often overlooked being deemed as less important because they are not there to attract business. However, a poorly functioning intranet is a real detriment to the running of a business.

These are the top traits of a badly functioning intranet.

1. If one cannot search for anything, the intranet is essentially useless. I've experienced so many intranets with the most useless search functionality. Spending a little money to use a local Google search plugin or equivalent often gets around this issue.

2. Badly run intranets often have obsolete and duplicated information scattered throughout. For example, policies, templates, and corporate guidelines. Many

intranets are connected to a document management system like Sharepoint. However, most businesses struggle to standardise and maintain them employing the use of in-house labour ill-experienced on how to professionally build them.

3. As with an externally-facing website, broken links and obsolete pages are indicators of a poorly maintained intranet site.

4. Intranets with a mix of different typologies, templates, and branding designs look terrible and completely unprofessional. Such occurrences happen all too frequently during company rebrands.

5. Most badly run intranets have security issues making it very easy for prying eyes to access confidential information. This is often attributable to either scant attention in creating a robust security model or simply that those building the intranet do not possess the sufficient know-how.

Conclusion

Websites and intranets represent the face of the business. Humans are generally fickle beings and are notorious in making judgements on how good a company just by looking at its website. Like most things in life, I guess.

Imagine looking for a building architect company and you stumble upon its website and it looks like it was built during the early 90s by total amateurs. It doesn't matter how good the quality of its services, for most newcomers not familiar with the company will immediately judge a book by its cover and move elsewhere.

As first impressions count, pay the money and get a well-built professional-looking and high-performing website.

And remember. The website doesn't have to be overly comprehensive and complex flowing to the rim with oodles of material. A good simple website that works really well is all that's often needed.

And one last very important thing.

Get the website reviewed thoroughly checking spelling, grammar, mobile numbers, people's names and addresses. Embarrassingly, I made a bad mistake by getting two numbers back to front on the contact mobile number.

It was wrong for nearly two years until a customer pointed it out to me!