

WHY MOST WEBSITES SUCK...

AND HOW YOURS CAN KICK BUTT!

A quick-start guide to developing a website that attracts prospects, keeps them reading and helps them buy what you're selling.

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About Brian Birnbaum

A Copywriter and Online Marketing Strategist, Brian's clients include companies that don't have an in-house writer, are up to their eyeballs in work or need a fresh and experienced marketing perspective. He helps companies of all sizes develop marketing materials based on smart positioning, consumer-focused writing and sensible marketing strategy.

He's written for multinational corporations like Royal Bank of Canada, EF Education First, EXFO and Widex as well as successful start-ups like B2B Connex, InfoSpi, EmailDeals and Lifestyle Hearing.

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Introduction

More and more people are going online to search for your business. In fact, studies suggest that the number is now over 90%.

So we're officially in an era when having a good website that speaks strongly to prospects is often the most important marketing tool at your disposal. On the other hand, a poor website can have a negative effect on your company, both in terms of public perception and on your bottom line.

The question is: When people find your website, *what will their impression be?*

Will they be drawn in by the targeted copy and simple navigation or overwhelmed by masses of complex information and a confusing set-up?

Why Should They Choose You?

It takes people literally a second or two to decide whether to stay on a website or click away so you *better be sure* yours is offering them something your competitors aren't.

I'm not talking about fancy graphics or flashy animations either, I'm talking about solid and valuable content that is going to keep them reading and engaged until they ultimately perform an action that would benefit your company; like a phone call, a visit, a sign-up or a purchase.

As a copywriter, I've written dozens of websites from scratch for both multinational corporations and plucky single person start-ups, I've also helped many companies improve their existing sites. For this guide, I've taken the lessons learned during my web writing experiences and organized them so you can develop or improve your own site.

I'm going to focus on how you can enhance the 'stickability' of your site, turn casual readers into buyers and get them talking about you through social media channels or by old fashioned (but highly desirable) word-of-mouth. Because my expertise lies in writing, most of the information you'll read is related to that subject. I hope you find it of value.

Creating an Online Strategy for Your Website

What are your goals?

Before searching for a designer, picking images, writing a single word or planning the structure of your website, take some time to think about the purpose of your site and decide what you want to get from it.

The goal(s) of your website might include:

- Educating prospects about your product or service
- Generating leads
- Selling products online
- Establishing yourself as an authority in your field
- Encouraging people to contact you
- Guiding people to your brick and mortar location

Your website's purpose has to be absolutely clear from the beginning if it's going to do the job like it's supposed to. *Keep in mind that your website can have more than one function...* that's totally fine and don't let yourself be overwhelmed! By combining different elements on your site, you will be able to achieve multiple business goals.

A Closer Look...

Let's look at some of the different things that a website can help you achieve and a few ideas that can get you where you need to go. This list isn't intended to be complete but will hopefully give you an idea of how to begin your website strategy session.

Generating Leads: Collect email addresses through a sign-up box by offering a special report, newsletter or even a discount coupon.

Establishing Yourself as an Authority: Create and maintain an industry Blog, provide downloadable reports, articles or offer a free analysis to your prospects.

Encouraging People to Call or Write: Ask them! It's amazing how many websites don't have even basic calls to action. Offer people a freebie or an analysis of their problem in exchange for a contact.

Selling Products Online: Create distinct sales pages that explain why they should purchase your product using features and benefits (more on this later).

Take enough time to write down what you hope to achieve and how your website might help you get there. By being organized at the beginning, you'll save a ton of time on the back-end of your website development project.



TIP: Figure out what you want your website to do before doing anything else. A little thought on the front-end can save a bunch of time on the back-end.

The Homepage: Your Chance to GRAB and HOLD the Reader (Don't hurt them)

The homepage is by far the most important page on most websites.

It's the page that people visit first and it should to do *two things*: tell the reader WHAT THEIR PROBLEM IS and explain HOW YOU CAN FIX IT. If you've done these two things well, there's a pretty good chance visitors will keep clicking through to your secondary pages. As they get deeper into your website, your chances of persuading prospects to choose your product or service instead of the other guy's goes up substantially.

One component an unbelievable number of website homepages don't have is a simple explanation of the company's product or service! This is absolutely vital, yet people miss it all the time.

When a visitor lands on your homepage, he or she has to know exactly what it is you offer and how you can help them (I call this the Problem - Solution format). Then they can decide if your company fits their needs.

I suggest you have a look at your website now and see if it meets the PROBLEM – SOLUTION approach. Now have a look at the competition. Where do you stand?

If you've put together a solid homepage and your rival hasn't, then you're already way ahead of the game because if people make a comparison, you'll come out ahead in their minds.

Remember that when online, people have very short attention spans because the Internet gives them so much CHOICE. If your website homepage doesn't say exactly what your prospect's problem is and how you can solve it... start again.

To give you an idea of how important the website homepage is, I typically charge more to write a homepage for my clients than I do for an interior page. This is simply because it takes the most thought, and the most effort to get it right.



TIP: Use the Problem-Solution Format. Explain the reader's problem and then tell them how you'll fix it.

Don't Be So Self-Centered A.K.A. Talk About the Prospect!

Most of us have been on at least one horrible date in our life. When you called your friend to give them the details of how it all went wrong, you might have started by saying something like:

“He just wouldn't shut up about himself. He talked about how great his job was, how fast his car was, his last tropical vacation and how popular he is with other women. It was like I wasn't even there.”

If we don't enjoy hearing people go on and on about themselves in the 'real world' then why the heck would we want to online? Well... *we don't!*

Head over to any company website you can think of, including your own if you like.

You might read something like:

'We've been in business for 25 years because we take care of our customers. We are focused on quality, innovation and fitting your unique needs. We take our job seriously, because the manufacture of red clown-noses is our passion.'

You know what's wrong with this kind of writing? Besides not actually saying anything of note, it's totally self-centered. It's all about the company, not how the company is going to help the reader solve their monumental life problem (even if it's buying a red clown-nose).

No one cares about you... they only care about how you can help THEM.

It's all about explaining your service or product in the context of your prospect's challenge.

If you sell back pain medication, you might talk about how back pain makes everyday life difficult, how even getting out of bed in the morning is a challenge, how it's tough to focus... and *only then* tell them how your medicine takes care of those problems.

You want to have your prospect nodding as he reads. Then you make your case that you can help.

As one great copywriter put it, 'People aren't buying the drill-bit, they're buying the hole!'



TIP: Only talk about your company in the context of how you can help the prospect. As Seth Godin and others say, "No one cares about you."

Write Like You Talk... Don't Be So Uptight!

Another totally avoidable mistake people make when writing their website is thinking that to seem professional, they have to write very formally, using big, fancy words and confusing jargon.

This is a serious problem because when your prospects are bored or confused, you have a pretty small chance of convincing them to do business with you.

Remember that no matter if your target market is lumberjacks or rocket scientists, they all want to read enjoyable, simple-to-understand copy. If an idea can be explained in simple terms, then do it. And complex ideas can almost always be explained simply, at least fairly simply.

For example, I can understand the concept of gravity without understanding the actual physics behind it.

Did you know that the majority of newspapers write for the Grade 6 level or below? Yes, even the 'respectable' papers. It's simply because they want to communicate directly with their audience and can't do that if only 2% of the population can understand what the heck they're talking about.

A rule of thumb: If you have to read a sentence more than once to get it, write it again! It's not working.

You can still sound like a true professional without sounding like a robot. Try it. You'll be happy with the results.

I didn't make up the following advice but it's helpful to keep in mind: "Write like you're sitting across the table from someone while talking about your company." It might help loosen you up, because in my opinion, overly-formal writing is a direct result of subconscious nervousness.



TIP: Write like you speak and remember your prospects are normal people...not robots.

Features + Benefits = Action

Website copywriting is like all other types of marketing text in one way. It's very, very important to list features of your product or service AND **how those features will benefit the prospect.**

Don't rely on your audience's imagination, though it can be a powerful tool when copy is well written. Spell it out for the reader very clearly because you'd be surprised how many people have little to no imagination.

An example that might help:

Just The Feature: Our ice cream has seven types of nuts.

Feature and Benefit: Our ice cream has seven types of nuts so you get a crunch and nutty flavor with every bite.

See the difference? I'm eating the crunchy, nutty ice cream. How about you?

One very important thing to note: Think about the benefits that will appeal to the prospect, **not to you.** You might think one aspect of your product or service is very interesting, but before you use it in your copy, make sure the prospect also finds it valuable.

You know how you can find out what your customer likes about you? Ask your customers! You might be amazed to learn that something you thought of as a small part of your offering is actually the *most important* part for customers.

I call this the 'Prospect mindset' and once you get the hang of it, your website copy will be much, much stronger.

More on the prospect mindset in my newsletter '51 Ways to Instantly Improve Your Marketing'. Sign-up at www.brianbirnbaum.com.



TIP: Forget about what part of your product or service YOU think is important. Talk about what your PROSPECT thinks is important.

Calls to ACTION... Today, Now, Right Away!

You should have a call to action at least once on every page. Direct them to contact you, sign up or buy. The point is, make sure you're telling them to DO SOMETHING.

People don't want to make up their own minds in a lot of cases so why not nudge them in a direction that will benefit you?

Make sure you also have the contact details right in the call to action or a link directly to your contact page. Don't make them search for it because they might not bother.

Also, make sure you tell them when to contact you. Hint: You probably want them to contact you immediately!

It also doesn't hurt to explain what benefit they'll get from contacting you.

'Call us today at 123-4567 to get rid of your sweaty armpits by next week.'

'Email us and we'll send your FREE industry report right away. Learn the top ten mistakes that can destroy your business.'

Pretty simple and very effective.



TIP: Include an incentive in your Call-To-Action and make it timely!

Testimonials Show The Love

Most time people won't take your word for it. No matter how honest you might be, prospects are skeptical. It's simply because they are bombarded with sales messages constantly and have their guard up.

But there's good news...

Prospects trust people who are just like them. So if average folks give a positive review of your company, use it. It will help break down the natural resistance that's a part of every sales process

The lesson here is simple: create a Testimonials Page on your site if possible.

When identifying the people who gave you your testimonial, be sure to use first AND last name, and city, company etc. if possible. The more information you provide, the more credibility you get.

Also, make sure you have permission to use the testimonials or happy can turn to angry very quickly!



TIP: To boost credibility include as much information about the person who gave the testimonial as possible. Provide full name, title and company if possible.

Proofreading: Embrace Your Inner Nerd

So you've written website copy that you're sure will draw in prospects and convert them to buyers at a record pace.

Nothing can stop you now! Except a boneheaded spelling mistake that makes your company look like a bunch of total amateurs.

No matter how polished your copy might be, a small mistake can be very costly. Make sure you proofread your copy thoroughly and then make sure at least one other person goes over it as well.

When we've been working on something, fine-tuning and editing it like crazy, our eyes tend to glide right over mistakes. This is because we're so familiar with the content that we subconsciously ignore many words and tend to just glance over the text. It's science man.

If you want to really get your proofreading to the highest level, read my blog post "[Is That a Typo?!?](#)" Here are a few tips to get you going:

- 1) Print the document. Don't read it on screen.
- 2) Use a red pen to mark changes so you don't miss them when you're making corrections.
- 3) Read the document backwards. This forces your eye to examine every word.
- 4) Get someone else to proofread the document.

I know proofreading isn't exciting but it sure can mean the difference between a sale and an eye roll. Don't neglect it.



TIP: Get someone else to read your copy to make sure you haven't missed any mistakes!

Stuff That Can Make or Break A Website

Simple Navigation

My general rule of thumb is that people visiting your site should be able to reach any page in one or two clicks and find their way back in the same. I hate when I find a piece of information once on a website, and can't find it again. Like most people, I'll just go to another website that is easier to navigate around in.

Use a simple left to right navigation bar for major pages and for sites with more pages, use a drop down menu of sub-sections.

Be Clear When Naming Website Pages

Use clear, recognizable terms for your pages like Home, Services, Contact Us etc. Don't get fancy and use names people won't recognize. I hate when people try and get creative when that will only lead to confusion.

Integrate Social Media

You have to make things easy for people or they probably won't bother, and this definitely includes discussing your company.

Add social media functionality to your site so if someone wants to spread the word, they're one click away.

All of the relevant social media sites provide 'buttons' you can add to your site quickly and easily and offer an instant link to your social media properties for readers.

Keep the Design Clean and Uncluttered

Don't try and put every piece of information you have on the homepage. Keep it clean. Place visual links to important areas of the website if necessary but try and avoid clutter. It must be obvious to a visitor what action they are to take once arriving.

Offering them several options is okay, for example, a call-out box to the Services Page as well as the Contact Page, but don't offer them too many options or you'll be dealing with analysis paralysis and a high bounce-rate.

Adding Music and/or Video

If you are planning on adding some music or video to your website, make sure it doesn't start playing automatically. Give people the choice to hit the 'play' button... or not hit it. It's very annoying otherwise and a bad online practice.

Adding a Capture Form to Your Contact Page

I do suggest a capture form for your contact page. This way you can hang on to someone's contact details when they get in touch. If you do capture their info and follow up at a later date, be gentle. Don't sign them up to your newsletter or anything without letting them know this will happen if they fill out your form. Also, I highly recommend you include a telephone number on your contact page as well as the address of your physical location so if they feel less than comfortable handing over their details they still have an avenue of contact.

Conclusion

Marketing can seem overwhelming. There are so many possibilities to choose from! Where do you start?

Remember the saying, “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.”

Every marketing process can be simplified by breaking it down into easily digestible chunks. Just like your website. Focus on one task, do it well and then move on to the next one.

Create a high level plan. Decide on the various sections of your website and break each part down into more easily-completed tasks.

Then work your way through, checking off tasks as you do them. Simple!

I also suggest that your immediate goal shouldn't be perfection. Look at your website development as an ongoing process. See how everything is working and then change, add or remove bits as necessary.

No problem.

The guidelines and ideas in this guide work. This e-book relies on my own experience as well as the research, testing, effort, success and failure of countless others.

I hope you've enjoyed reading this as much as I did writing it and if you have any questions at all, please do send me an email at brian@brianbirnbaum.com or feel free to call me during regular business hours at **416-220-3351**.