How to Communicate With Your Web Site Design Group

An issue, which has not been given much attention, is how web site business owners communicate with their design group, be it internal or an external agency. Too often the interchange is cursory consisting of a high-level list of functions the owners want the web site to perform supplemented by questions about the desired style or image asked by the design firm.

The result is a web site that is heavy on traditional marketing design containing a few expensive functional destinations but that overall fails to meet the real business opportunities. While it is convenient to blame the design organization, this generally is not where the fault lies. More often it is a failure of the business owners to articulate and communicate the important business essentials that give the designers the substance to design around.

There are at least three common reasons for this failure:

1. Many business owners do not have a process for setting business objectives for their web sites.

2. Web designers do not have an effective process for setting business objectives, nor should they. It is not their responsibility, area of interest, or expertise.

3. Even when the business owners have created explicit business objectives for the web site, they do not have established vehicles for translating those objectives into foundation web elements and efficiently communicating those elements to design specialists.

Setting business objectives for the web site can be complex as our newsletter, *Dollars and Sense: Measuring the value of web sites*,[1] demonstrates. However, there are structured processes that can help. The process used by iorg.com brings together information on the company's strategic objectives, web site audiences, and functions available on the web site. Business objectives for the web site functions are then developed and appropriate business metrics identified.

In addition to the explicit business objectives tied to each function of the web site, two additional vehicles are used for translating the business objectives into web elements and communicating those to the web designers:

- Key Scenarios
- A Stripped Home Page

Each not only delivers key information to the designers, but also becomes a tool that the designers can use to test the designs against the objectives.

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[1] http://www.iorg.com/papers/0310newsletter.html

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Key scenarios provide the web site requirements in an actionable story form that captures the motivation, intent and mission of a key type of site visit from the visitor's perspective. A set of key scenarios not only describes the requirements, the scenarios can be used by the designers to power heuristic reviews to test designs during the design process and they can be used to build usability tests during the implementation.

There are a number of books available on building scenarios. However, many times scenarios are not created using the formal approaches because collecting the necessary data takes too long, is too expensive, or both. But even without the extensive research to back up the results, building scenarios is a worthwhile exercise. The discipline of using a structured process to think through a broader set of influencing factors is better than leaving the detailed requirements to chance.

The stripped home page is a technique borrowed from traditional marketing. In the traditional context it refers to stripping the marketing message down to its essentials then dressing it up for the various media situations in which it occurs.

In the case of the home page, the process refers to stripping the home page of all marketing design elements leaving only the category and link names. These are organized to support the key scenarios and business objectives for the site. The stripped home page then is given to the designers to dress. Analogous to the traditional marketing usage, the key categories and link names in the stripped home page communicate the essential business elements and guarantee that the dressed result retains these elements as the designers add the aesthetics.

On larger sites, creating stripped broker pages for the landing page of each major section provides additional requirements information and guidance in the design.

Do not rely on the design group to extract the business objectives and requirements from you.
Develop it first, and give it to them as part of the request for a proposal.

1. You will get more accurate project cost estimates

2. If it is a competitive request you will have more accurate comparisons

3. Most importantly, you will get a web site that provides the explicit business results you need and want.

Summary:

- Communicating business requirements to design teams is critical for achieving business results from your web site.

- The process starts with web site functions by defining clear business objectives that are aligned with the business strategic goals.

- Key visitor scenarios provide the requirements for the web site and can be used to drive both heuristic and usability testing during the design and implementation phases.

- A stripped home page and key broker pages identify the navigation and orientation information that is key to the business objectives and scenarios and provide the essential structure and parameters that need to be supported by the aesthetic design.

- Do not shift responsibility for extracting the business objectives and requirements from you to the design firm; most do not do it well; it is not their responsibility; it removes the essentials too far from the business owners, and it deprives you of a key management tool.

If you would like help implementing these processes in your organization, the Web Site Business Alignment Workshop offered by iorg.com provides the structure and training for the processes outlined above. During the workshop, the participating stakeholders create actual deliverables that can be used to communicate the key web site business requirements to web site designers.

iorg.com workshops, audits, and consulting teach your non-technical business managers how to develop web site strategy and objectives that support your business, translate those objectives into auditable design requirements, and effectively communicate those requirements to designers and developers.

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