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# SAMPLE: Effective Web Design

## Best Practice Guide

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# SAMPLE: Effective Web Design



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# 1. Introduction – why a best practice guide on website design?

There are many books and blogs on different aspects of web design, but these sources date quickly, typically refer to only one aspect of web design and it can take a lot of time to find the quality guidance you need.

Our aim in creating this guide is to provide a regularly updated, single point of reference covering best practice approaches for all the topics that anyone involved with website design needs to do an effective job.

These key topics needed for an effective web design include:

- Accessibility
- User-centred design and usability
- Internet marketing planning and improvement process
- Information architecture and findability
- Search engine optimisation (SEO)
- Web standards
- Persuasion to deliver business results
- Web analytics
- Legal requirements

We don't include guidance on technical aspects of site design coding using web standards like XHTML, CSS and Javascript although we do cover the importance of agreeing web standards support at the start of a design project.

## 1.1. Who is this guide for?

We have created this guide for everyone who is involved with commissioning, designing and managing websites.

It incorporates our collective experience of designing results-based websites so that you can avoid the time and expense of developing sub-optimal designs and features that fail to deliver the best results.

If you are **commissioning** a website, this guide will give you:

- **Templates for developing a brief** for a new website
- Full details on all the **business requirements** a website must deliver
- **What to look for in an agency** when selecting the core competencies such as visual design, usability, accessibility, information architecture, persuasion and search engine optimisation.

If you are involved in **designing** a website, this guide will give you:

- **Best practice guidelines** for all key aspects of website design including: visual design, usability, accessibility, information architecture, persuasion and search engine optimisation. Benchmark your agency's capabilities against best practice.
- A detailed **reference for implementation** of practical features of websites including home page design, page template layout, navigation, on-site search, search engine optimisation.



- **Inspiration on different design approaches** for a range of different sites and features.
- A **review of your capabilities** against what businesses are looking for, so helping you pitch more effectively and design better quality sites

If you are **managing** a website, this guide will give you:

- A **framework to benchmark your site** design against competitors.
- **Practical tips** on improvements for different aspects of your site like the home page, page templates, navigation and search functionality.
- **Best practice in persuasion** through refining your key marketing messages and how they are communicated.

In this first edition of the guide, we focus on commercial websites, although we have included examples of not-for-profit and public-sector sites. Many of the best practice principles we describe are relevant to all websites.

The examples in this guide acknowledge that radically different design approaches are often required by different types of site. For example a transactional e-commerce site (e.g. [www.tesco.com](http://www.tesco.com)), will be quite different in design from a B2B services-oriented relationship-building website (e.g. [www.accenture.com](http://www.accenture.com)) as will a Brand building site (e.g. [www.heinz.com](http://www.heinz.com)) and finally a Portal or media site (e.g. [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)). We use examples from all of these types of site.

## 1.2. Why a best practice guide on website design?

How can we make best practice recommendations for website design when the aims of different sites are so diverse? Surely best practice varies for different business types, different creative styles, and different technologies? Then there are the different types of site, from blogs to complex transactional e-commerce sites and campaign sites from simple landing pages to rich, Flash-based brand experiences.

But all sites share certain features if they are to be successful:

- They must engage their audiences with relevant content and interactive experiences;
- They must be easy to use; they must be accessible through different devices and to users with visual impairment or other disabilities including motor control, learning difficulties and deaf users;
- They must ultimately deliver returns on the time and money their owners have invested in them;
- In a nutshell, they must deliver a **compelling experience** for their visitors.

That's why nearly everyone involved in web design is passionate about it – it's the challenge of balancing all of these factors which are constantly evolving due to changes in technologies, creative design styles and competition.

In this best practice report we will acknowledge these differences but explain how best practice should be followed for different sites. It will allow you to benchmark yourself against the common web design principles, patterns and processes used by some of the best practitioners in the digital industry.

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## 1.3. How is this guide structured?

This guide is designed so you can apply it both to creating new sites and improving existing sites through re-designs and “quick-win” enhancements.

We have structured the guide around all the design aspects necessary to create a balanced design.

There are 14 key aspects of web design implementation which need to be managed for a successful project. These are broken down into six parts which we have made available as separate sections for ease of reference. We have summarised the success factors in *Figure 1* Success map for effective web design.

Here is an overview, a flavour of what we cover in the different sections:

### **PART 1. Strategy and Planning**

- Section 2. Internet marketing planning and improvement process.

To create a website which delivers results for its owners is not just about visual design, it's not just about usability or accessibility or indeed about the development tools selected.

An effective site requires an in-depth understanding of marketplace within which the website operates. In particular, the context for an effective customer experience should be assessed as part of **customer experience management**. To understand the marketplace and to tap into it requires a sound Internet marketing plan.

In this section, we outline a structured process for developing an Internet marketing strategy that aligns with an organisations online and offline marketplaces. We also give examples of how strategic goals translate into site designs.

### **PART 2. User-centred design and usability**

- Section 3. User-centred web design process.

User-centred design (UCD) is an established, proven approach to design or range of products. It has been embraced by web design and usability agencies as a sound approach to delivering customer-centric websites that deliver value for a business. It should be a key business requirement to appoint an agency which has a sound UCD process and the right skill set and experience to execute it.

In this section we introduce the key techniques of UCD such as audience analysis, persona development, usability and information architecture. We then cover these in more detail later in the document.

- Section 4. Web usability.

The reason why usability is critical to website design is obvious. Jakob Nielsen expresses it well in his “Usability 101” when he says:

*“On the Web, usability is a necessary condition for survival. If a website is difficult to use, people leave. If the homepage fails to clearly state what a company offers and what users can do on the site, people leave. If users get lost on a website, they leave. If a website's information is hard to read or doesn't answer users' key questions, they leave. Note a pattern here?”*

The implication is that many will never return either.

In this section, we examine the rationale for usability and best approaches for different usability techniques including expert reviews, questionnaires, interviews, usability testing and focus groups.

### **PART 3. Accessibility and Web standards**

- Section 5. Web accessibility.

*"For me being online is everything. It's my hi-fi, it's my source of income, it's my supermarket, it's my telephone. It's my way in."*

- Lynn Holdsworth, screen reader user, Web Developer and Programmer. (Source: RNIB)

This quote shows the importance of web accessibility to a visually impaired user of a website who uses a screen-reader which reads out the navigation options and content on a website.

In this section, we review the benefits of implementing accessibility and web standards, different requirements for accessibility and summarise the places you can go to find the latest standards and tools for assessing the accessibility of your sites

### **PART 4. Information Architecture**

- Section 6. Information architecture.

*"It is important to recognise that every information system, be it a book or an intranet, has an information architecture. `Well developed' is the key here, as most sites don't have a planned information architecture at all. They are analogous to buildings that weren't architected in advance. Design decisions reflect the personal biases of designers, the space doesn't scale over time, technologies drive the design and not the other way around."*

Rosenfeld and Morville (2002)

Information architecture tends to play the role of the ugly stepsister at the Web Design Ball – it's not sexy for many tastes. But just how important is information architecture (IA)? Where does it come on the list of priorities for a new site design? Is it more important or less important than each of usability, accessibility and persuasion? Most would argue that it is less important, but we believe the value of information architecture is under-estimated.

As the quote suggests, without a sound foundation provided by an effective information architecture a site is likely to be less usable, accessible and less persuasive.

In this section, we review structured techniques for creating an information architecture including information seeking behaviour analysis; content analysis and document metadata, card-sorting and controlled vocabularies.

- Section 7. Visual Design.

With such a focus on usability, accessibility and persuasion in results-led website design, the role of the visuals within a site can be underestimated compared to the more functional aspects of website design.

But the visual design certainly does have a major influence on the experience as perceived by visitors and designers certainly spend a lot of intention on the visual design.

In this section, we explore different aspects of getting the visuals right including site personality, use of colour, images, typography and page templates and layout.

- Section 8. Findability Best Practice Principles.

Many web users visiting many sites are directed information seekers who are looking for something specific – a particular product or particular content. And they want to find it fast. So a key requirement of all sites is to make it easy for the site visitor to find the content – to quickly connect them with what they are looking for.

Usability and accessibility don't quite emphasise the importance of this, so we need a new 'ility'. Findability. We like this word – it emphasises the importance of focusing on navigation, on-site search and document metadata within a design project.

In this section of the guide, we will take an in-depth look at maximising findability on your site through redesigning or refining your navigation and search functions.

- **Section 9. Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) Best Practice Principles**

Search engine optimisation (SEO) should be built into your plan for a new or refined site from the outset. Amongst designers, there is a debate about how proactive they should be in achieving SEO. Some believe that SEO occurs naturally with a good quality of standards based coding. We disagree.

Our view is that for commercial sites, it is essential to be proactive to gain the best results in a competitive market. Good positions won't happen by accident. SEO should be at the core of all site developments.

In this section, we introduce the key practical elements of SEO for designers which determine a website's ranking position.

## **PART 5. Persuasive Design, copywriting and web analytics**

- **Section 10. Persuasive design & copywriting.**

Persuasive design is perhaps talked about less than the other techniques we have covered in this guide such as usability and accessibility. But in our view, it is equally important. Sites which are reviewed, built and monitored through a persuasion approach will likely give better results than those where usability or accessibility is to the fore.

In this section, we will illustrate Persuasive Design techniques for different page types and SEO Best Practice by examining Econsultancy.com, so showing some of the 'secrets of our success'. We also review other sites.

- **Section 11. Using web analytics to improve website design effectiveness**

Although "web analytics" is the formal name for the process and tools used to analyse and improve the marketing effectiveness of websites, many marketers and designers, know it simply as 'website statistics'. Many initially view these statistics on a par with paint drying after seeing the 100 pages of monthly site statistics provided by IT, but if so, they are probably in the wrong job.

Consequently, in many companies where the website is not core to business activity, these site stats are ignored. But successful e-marketers make the effort to understand the different reports and then ask the right questions to understand cause, effect and remedy or opportunity.

In this section we introduce different types of web analytics tools and highlight the most useful reports to review in your web analytics system to improve website results.

## **PART 6. Implementation and management**

- **Section 12. Technical site requirements.**



A site will fail if it fails to deliver satisfactory experiences for its visitors. This is not only down to the factors we have reviewed such as content, usability and accessibility, but also dependent on the infrastructure including hosting, servers, content management systems. Speed and availability are still important in the broadband world.

In this section, we give pointers on how you can assess and improve the performance of your website.

- Section 13. The Law – is your site legally compliant?

Many laws have been enacted in many countries to control e-communications and e-commerce and to protect the consumer. Website owners are subject to these and it is typically directors within a company who are liable, so it is important to check your site is compliant. Reputational damage may be greater than the financial consequences of breaking the law. These laws are constantly being refined and new test cases in the courts help clarify the compliance required.

While we can't hope to take you through all the laws, and aren't qualified to do so – you should consult a lawyer. In this section, we can explain the main types of laws to which the owners of websites are subject and point you in the right direction for detailed, up-to-date guidance.

- Section 14. Selecting agencies to support web design.

We have seen that results-led web design is dependent on many success factors. This makes finding the best agencies for you is challenging.

In this section, we look at some of the types of agencies and issues to consider and we give a briefing checklist of issues to consider.

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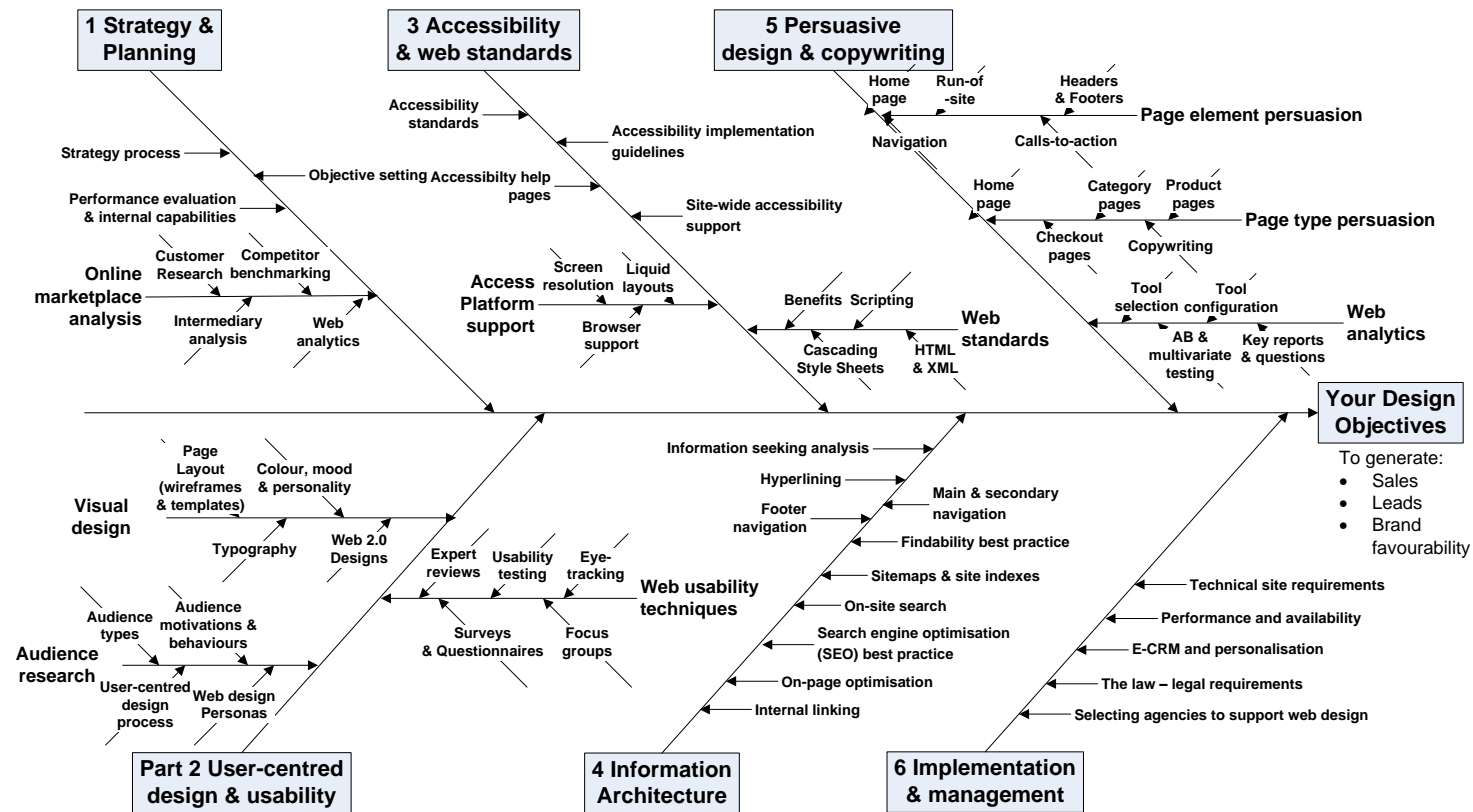


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Figure 1 - Success map for effective web design

## Effective web design success map



### 1.3.1. Features of this guide

To make it easier for you to assess the current effectiveness of your site, we have developed different features which summarise each aspect of website design which we cover. These include:

- A simple definition
- A summary of the business requirements for using a web design techniques
- A summary of best practice pointers for you to check your existing or planned design against.
- Example screenshots of best practice sites
- Links to the best web articles on each topics to save you the time in searching
- Key recommendations on approaches you should use and tips on website design and persuasion.

You will find these guidelines within the web design best practice report. These are designed to summarise the main features of an effective website and to give you an easy way to benchmark your website or agency capability against others.

#### Key Business Requirement 1

These should form a main heading in a brief for a new website design project.

**There are 27 top-level business requirements we detail in the report.** These need to be considered by all website owners. Each has an easy to follow box with sections explaining the business case for the requirement, examples, best practice, what to watch for and resources including links to free websites and books.

#### Key Business Recommendation 1

Issues businesses should consider their needs and specify them within their brief.

**There are 58 key business recommendations within the report.** These provide more detail on the main business requirements.

#### Web Design Approach 1

These are fundamental approaches in web design which designers may wish to turn to for reference when working on a particular issue.

**There are 56 web design approaches we detail in the report.** Each has an easy to follow box with sections explaining the design goals, examples, best practice, what to watch for and resources including links to free websites and books.

#### Web Design Tip 1

Practical tips to improve the effectiveness of a site design.

**There are 70 web design tips within boxes within the report.** Thousands more highlighted within the Web design approaches boxes.

#### Persuasion Technique 1

Practical approaches to improve results from web site design and copywriting.

We have also made extensive use of diagrams and example web pages which highlight best practice – there are **over 150 figures in this report to show our recommendations in practice.**

