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Preparing an effective design brief

Designing a web site is a mysterious process to many people. The following article was written to help demystify the process. It is a general overview and the theories in it apply to as many people as possible. It will not however apply to everyone.

The design brief and the steps involved in developing a 'typical' web site

I am often approached by clients who believe a web site would benefit their business. The first question, they invariably ask is...

" how much will it cost to build me a web site ? "

In order to answer this question I need information regarding the business that they are in, what they want from their web site, and what their budget is. In order to answer their question, I need to ask them many questions. Their answers to these questions become the design brief for the project. Once I have this I can write a proposal so that everything is clearly laid out. If the proposal is accepted, the project can begin and within a few weeks the client will have an excellent web site working to their complete satisfaction.

When I meet with a new client I go through the process of discovering the specific needs and we discuss how best to proceed. I ask many carefully chosen questions to efficiently build a picture of the clients business and their desired outcome for a given project. I write all this down in a brief which later becomes the proposal.

Preparing such a design brief can be a profound experience for many of my clients as it forces them to examine the very nature of their business, where it's going, and how best to get there.

What goes in the brief?

As the web site is an extension of your business writing a brief for a web site is similar to writing a business plan for a business. Knowing what you want from your web site will make it easier and quicker to make decisions about the content and presentation. The brief will form the starting point for your designer to draw up a clear project specification.

The design brief should include the following information. The answers to these questions will provide a good foundation from which the designer can base their quote on.

- A profile of your business outlining the products / services that you offer
- Your target market. Who will be visiting your site? Their age groups, financial status and cultural background?
- Project outcomes. What you want the web site to provide you in return for your investment of time and money spent in its construction?
- Project scope. How big do you want the project to be? What is the budget for the project? What kind of services you wish to provide via the web site?
- What are the time constraints (if any) on the project? When does it need to be up and operational?
- Are there any web sites you've seen that you'd like to use to base your web sites design / style on? There is no need to spend thousands reinventing what is already available

The proposal

The proposal is an agreement about what is to be done, and a guide on how it is to be done. It is created from the design brief given by the client. The proposal is submitted before commencement of the project so that all parties agree on how best to proceed. It clarifies any issues

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before they arise, include cost and time estimates, and in my experience are arguably the most important phase of development.

Building your web site

Once the proposal accepted, the designer can begin constructing the web site in the same way that a builder builds a house once the architect has finished designing it. The proposal is followed as closely as possible as this is what was agreed upon by both parties.

By following the proposal it also guarantees that the designer sticks to the budget and doesn't add anything unnecessary or not previously agreed on. By the same token, it also guarantees that the client doesn't change their mind halfway through the design requiring large tracts of the project to be reconstructed or thrown out.

Project plan

Following are some details regarding the process of developing a web site. This is typical for a web site design. Interestingly, the following steps are also applicable to many other forms of design including graphic design.

There is no need to get spooked by this list, I included here for you to see what is involved in developing a professional web site so that you gain a better understanding of the process and of the costs involved.

Stage 1:

1. Initial interview to gather information for developing the web site
 - Identify goals and objectives of the web-site
 - Collect and analyse information required for site production
 - Organisational structure of the web-site
 - Prototype drawings for web-site layout and navigation
2. Cost estimate and proposal submitted to client
3. Client begins gathering the content needed for the site production

Stage 2:

1. Site prototype created based on proposed designs
2. Client supplies content (text, photos, drawings, stock items, etc)
3. Collation, formatting and adding of content to site
 - Inventory and proof read content
 - Add content to web site
 - Complete HTML for all pages and content
4. Integration, testing and quality control
 - Complete linking and navigation
 - Final proof reading of complete site
 - Comprehensive testing (of forms, Java scripts, links, etc)
5. Web site goes live !

Conclusion

Having a clear plan of action is essential whenever undertaking a new business, project, or web site. Whenever you are committed to spending a considerable amount of time and money on something it is worth having a plan, and it is worth writing down.

Writing a design brief is often a learning process requiring one to ask hard questions and come up with real answers. You may find that the design brief actually helps you more than the designer it was intended for!

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