



Web site strategy and measuring success

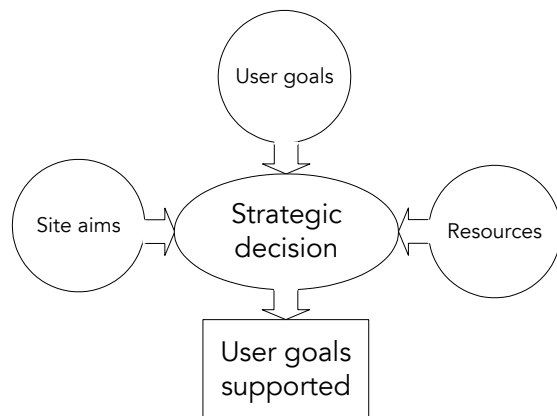
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Most organisations now have web sites; however, judging by our experience, a lot of organisations don't have clarity about why they have the site and how they can tell if it's successful. For many, the focus is on what the organisation wants to communicate rather than on what the user wants to do on the site. This paper discusses why clarity about strategy and success will result in a more effective website.

The web site strategy

In order to have an effective website - one that is both usable and that meets the aims of the organisation - there needs to be clarity about:

- The target users and the goals these users wish to achieve on the site
- The site owner's aims for the site – these will be shaped by the overall organisational strategy, and will clarify who the organisation wants to target and what the organisation hopes to get out of the site
- The resources available to manage the site – the money and people, what is affordable
- And, therefore, the user goals the site is to support



What matters is that target users can quickly and easily achieve their goals, and that achieving these meets the site owner's aims and is manageable within the site owner's resources.

Strategy exists at different levels in a business – corporate, business and operational (Bowman, 1998). The web site strategy tends to be at the operational level but shaped by the corporate and business levels. Simply put, strategy means that "the top management team has a shared understanding of where the firm is trying to go" (Bowman, 1998); at the corporate level this can

also be described as a plan, a pattern of behaviour, a position in the market, or a way of doing things (Mintzberg et al, 1998). So, at the corporate level 'strategy' can be quite broad. However, by the time it gets down to the web site level there needs to be greater precision such that the 'right' content and functionality can be defined.

Users might have lots of things they want to do on a site, but these may not fit with what the site owner wants to provide. Therefore, the *user goals the site is to support* is determined by the site aims i.e. what the organisation wants the site to do for it. However, the user goals should provide the lead; users come to sites to achieve goals – if they don't get what they want they will leave the site and be dissatisfied. Organisation centric websites will not provide a good user experience: Gerry McGovern describes these as suffering from 'organaritis' – focusing more on the internal needs of the organisation than the needs of users (New Thinking 7th June 2009). For non commercial sites, in particular, this is often the case: the site aims may not fit with users' goals, or there are so many aims it is unrealistic to expect the site to be able to achieve them.

On sites with a large number of user goals, or large ambitions but limited resources, it is necessary to either limit the number of user goals supported or prioritise these. It is not possible to have an effective site that does everything with limited resources! It is better to have a site that focuses effectively on the 20% of really important content that meet 80% of users' needs – rather than trying to deliver 100% of content badly; the 'long tail' of less frequently required content should be handled in other way e.g. by providing clear contact information to handle queries. – local authority sites take note!

To complicate things, now that mobile devices are commonly used to access websites as well as desk and lap tops, a single web strategy may not be appropriate. Users can often have very different goals that they wish to achieve when using their mobiles than on a desk or lap top. Virtually nobody is going to use a mobile to look at a web site if they have a larger machine handy. The mobile gets used when the user is out and about, and for very different things, for example maps and addresses to find a destination being visited rather than browsing a product range. So clarity about users' mobile needs will enable the site

owner to deliver more effectively against these needs – it may be that a distinct mobile web strategy needs to be developed.

Clarity about the strategy provides a framework about what content needs to be on the site and how it needs to be delivered. This also enables decisions on priorities depending on:

- The resourcing, content or functionality that would be required to support each of the web based user goals
- The budgets for supplying this resourcing or producing this content/functionality

What success looks like

Part of getting clarity about the web site strategy is deciding what success looks like, that is how to measure if the website is a success or a failure. Without clear indicators of success, content producers and designers don't have clear goals to work to, and managers will interfere with detailed web site design – even if they have no experience in or understanding of web design. The role of managers should be to be clear about what they want the site to do for them (in light of a good understanding of users' goals), define what success looks like, and then delegate.

The challenge is to determine what to measure and how to measure it. There's a range of quantifiable and qualitative measures that can be used to help assess current performance, and focus attention on the areas most in need of improvement, therefore informing decision making. These include:

- Traffic metrics e.g. how many people are visiting your site? What are they coming for? What keywords do visitors use in the search engines to find your site? How long are they staying in your site?
- Transaction metrics e.g. what are the transaction volumes and how do these compare with transaction goals.
- User satisfaction: the qualitative measure of user satisfaction is the best indicator of the usability and usefulness of the site e.g. 90% of target users found what they were looking for with a high degree of satisfaction and what they found was useful and relevant. Arguably, this is the most effective way of assessing return on investment.

Usability - Return on investment

"If usability were just common sense then how would you explain the rampant poor usability of applications and web sites" (Bias and Mayhew, 2005). Evidently, good usability will enable users to achieve more on a site and increase customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and allegiance to the brand; it will also achieve tangible cost savings in back office support and customer service, all these

improvements resulting in increased profitability. Good usability needs design based on sound usability principles which is then tested with real users – ideally at all stages of web development, from storyboarding and paper prototyping, through launch phase, to established site – but, how much to invest in usability. All too often sites are tested after they've been launched, when it would in fact be much more cost effective to test with real users at an earlier stage of the design lifecycle – the insights from testing can save a lot of money by focusing the developers on what the user wants, which is not always what the developer thinks they want – *"once a system is in development, correcting a problem costs 10 times as much as fixing the same problem in design. If the system has been released it costs 100 times as much relative to fixing in design"* (Bias and Mayhew, 2005). 'Expert reviews' may be cheaper than testing with real people, but are less effective and insightful: however 'expert' the expert is, they will never be able to predict all the issues that will emerge when real user who represents the target user base uses the site: this will include both the usability (the *behaviours* of the user when interacting with the interface) and the usefulness of the site (the *attitudes* the user has towards the content).

There are lots of ways of measuring Return on Investment (RoI) – Bias and Mayhew's book provides a very comprehensive review. The issue is identifying the RoI that is relevant for the organisation. For commercial businesses there is a clear relationship between usability investment and improved financial performance. For information sites, where there is not a direct financial return, increased user satisfaction is probably the best measurement.

Ultimately, having clarity about why a web site exists, what constitutes success and a realistic return on usability investment will provide real benefits for both the site owner and the site user.

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