Top advice from the experts when it comes to redesigning your website.

Redesigning and the relaunching an existing website can be cause for concern and bring to the surface some unique problems. If this is the case, these issues need to be discussed and handled with care. This could be from the viewpoint of technical considerations, dealing with third parties for transferring web hosting or even customer education and understanding.

1. Why are you redesigning?

There are many good reasons why your website might be in need of a refresh. Maybe it lacks features that your competitors have launched, maybe you've launched new products or services, or perhaps you're re-branding. Sometimes websites just look old and need a refresh.

It's important to understand your strategic goals and the motives behind the redesign and focus your attention and your designer's attention on the things that matter. It's also important that the redesign addresses your user's needs. UX (User experience) is now a huge part of your everyday life when surfing the web and it's not about what you want to say about your business, it's about what your potential customer wants to hear. Consider why users come to your website and what it is they're looking for, not what you want to push to them.

2. Research your competition in detail.

If your new website is going to blow all your competitors out of the water then it pays to spend time using their website and discovering why they are successful or why they're not. They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, so don't be afraid to take the best ideas from your competitors, find ways to improve on them and then find a way of merging them together. There's a difference between inspiration and plagiarism though and it's always better to innovate and to lead the pack, but if your competitors are doing something great and you feel this would be beneficial to your website, don't be scared of utilising this.

3. Technical considerations when making the big change over.

Whether you're keeping the same domain name or moving to a new one it's absolutely essential that it's this is done correctly.

Aside from the fact that you'll want limit any potential any downtime, there are serious considerations for your search engine optimisation efforts. You'll probably already have pages listed in Google and you'll want to make sure that your new site is crawled and that Google can find the location of your new pages. Make sure your web agency is competent in how to do this without any repercussions and without any drop in traffic. Years of marketing effort can be erased overnight if all of your pages suddenly drop out of the major search engines. If in doubt there is a great article and video from Google here...

http://support.google.com/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=83105

There are many other things to consider, like redirecting emails, changing logins to online services and security so make sure the move is planned properly and being executed by professionals.

4. Transferring and writing content.

Whether you're transferring content (text, images, files) from your old site to the new site or re-writing copy yourself for the new site, don't underestimate how long this can take.

If you're writing content from scratch then ideally you should be aiming for a "content first" approach, designing the website around the content rather than having the website designed first and then filling in the content. Why? Because the content of your site is nearly always more important than the design.

If you're transferring content to the new site (blog articles, comments, photo galleries etc.) then the easiest scenario is to keep the same CMS (content management system), meaning the content can stay where it is, but if there's a lot of it and it needs to move to a new CMS then you'll want to talk to your web agency about how they can make this painless for you by writing scripts to automate the process and import the old data.

5. Communicate with your customers.

Even though you're probably relaunching the website for all the right reasons, customers often fear change and may not understand your motives, especially if you're re-branding. It's important to communicate the change to them in advance and when you flick the switch, especially if you're re-branding or if you're changing email addresses or phone numbers. Emails and phones should all be properly redirected anyway but it's important to communicate the new ones to avoid any disruption.

6. It's a great PR opportunity.

There's no better time to organise a big PR push than when you relaunch your website. It's a busy time obviously because you've got the switch to think about and everything that comes with it like testing and preparing content, but your website is going to be looking better than ever and if you're adding new features for users then you're going to want to shout about them.

In addition to using email marketing to tell all your subscribers you should think about offline press releases to any relevant publications and making sure you reach influential bloggers, tweeters and speakers. If you don't already have an active social media presence then there's no better time to start, while you're telling everybody about your sparkly new website, direct them to your Facebook, Twitter and Google+ pages. This is increasingly important for search engine optimisation.

7. Keep it simple, and fast!

Nearly every trend in web design over the last few years can be categorised as making things either "simpler" or "faster". Don't spend all your time thinking about what you can add into your new website, spend a fair amount of it thinking about what you can take out.

Users can only look at one thing at a time and web users have short attention spans. By cutting out the fluff and concentrating on the features your customers actually use you'll simplify the user interface and your customers will be happier.

Making them simpler often has the knock on effect of making them faster (less content = faster loading pages). Not only do search engines favour faster loading pages, but every bit of research shows that users will view more pages on faster loading sites and conversion rates increase the faster sites get.

8. Ask for opinions, but don't design by committee.

It's always important to ask colleagues and customers their opinions and to gather ideas for new sites. Ideally you'll be running focus groups and running a survey on your old site to gauge opinions, your digital agency should be able to help with that. If there are many stakeholders internally (Managing Director, IT Director, HR Manager, Head of Sales etc.) then it's important to engage them early on, before the project starts.

Having said that, having a committee design your website (or anything really), usually ends in disaster. Once the project has begun there should only be one decision maker on the client side, working closely with their project manager on the agency side and they should place their trust in the experts they're hiring.

When the time comes to approve wireframes, designs or the finished site, approval should ideally rest with one person. If you find yourself saying any of the following...

"We all really like the site, but the CEO has decided he wants the whole site to be red."

"Jane from HR really thinks the menu should be on the left, but only in the jobs section."

"We've got an intern here who does a bit of web design, he thinks we should have a flash intro page."

...then control of the project has been lost. We don't mean to sound facetious, but this happens more than you can possibly imagine.

9. Understand design trends.

The digital world moves quickly and it's worth keeping up with the latest trends (or hire an agency that does), but that doesn't mean you have to use every new technology and following every trend, just the ones that fit.

Trends have seen websites using bigger text and more space, adapting to different devices (responsive web design), more integrations with social networks and the use of HTML5 to replace Flash.

If any of these trends work for you then use them, your customers will love seeing a shiny, modern looking website, but don't just use them for the sake of it. Remember, think about your content first!

10. Consider mobile viewers.

The chances are that when your current website was designed, the designer probably wasn't thinking too much about smartphone or tablet use, but research shows that depending on your market somewhere between 10% and 50% of your users are now trying to access your site from a mobile device, so you need to make sure you consider them.

As such, depending on what your site does, you may want to consider a "responsive" site which adapts it's layout to look as good on a phone as it does on a large monitor.

It's important to think about this early on and talk to your web team about your plans while you're still in the planning stage.

11. Use analytics to evaluate your old site and set benchmarks.

Analytics software like Google Analytics offers some fantastic insights into what your users are doing on your current site and which pages they look at the most. These stats should inform any decisions you make about your new site, so if you don't have an analytics package installed then now would be a great time to do it.

Not only will you have some great data on which to base decisions about the new site's functionality and content, when you make the switch you'll instantly be able to see how the new site compares. Does "time on site" increase? Are users looking at more pages? Has there been a positive or negative impact on SEO (search engine optimisation)? You'll only be able to measure the impact if you start analysing these things before the redesign.

12. Ask for feedback after launch, and listen!

Hopefully, your new site will be well received by current users and new users alike, but you should canvass opinions on the new site so that your users can give you valuable feedback on the redesign.

Most importantly, you need to be prepared to react, especially if a new feature or a change in functionality proves unpopular.

13. Communicate your ideas and likes/dislike with your agency.

If you're using a digital agency (like us) then we can't stress how important it is to communicate your plans and your likes/dislikes at the earliest opportunity.

We'll follow your brand guidelines to the letter, but we'll ask you what you have in mind when it comes to design, what websites inspire you and what definitely wouldn't go down well. All of this will help us craft a product that you (and your customers) will love. We'd hate to find out after several weeks of design and build that we're not heading in the right direction.

It sounds obvious, but we've had cagey clients before and we've been told "I'm not telling you what I like. You're the design agency, I want to see what you come up with". That really isn't helpful. Yes, we have some great designers and yes, we're being paid to be creative, but if you know what you like then don't keep it to yourself, we're far more likely to meet your brief if we know where we're heading.

14. Partner with the right technology company.

Obviously we're biased here, but if you're going to rely on an agency to build your website or web app for you (which is usually the sensible choice) then you need to know you can work well with them. Obviously, they need to be able to show that they can help you achieve what you want to achieve on a technical level, but they also need to be able to demonstrate that they're on the same wavelength as you and that they will communicate well and manage your project efficiently.

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