



## WEB DESIGN - Planning your website's structure & navigation

### STRUCTURE

Before you begin to build your website you should take a step back, take a deep breath and reflect! What am I trying to achieve? Am I selling a service, products, my expertise? Am I planning to reach a local audience or further afield? Do I need to include different language versions? Will I be using an online shopping cart system? How can I provide customer support? How can I reassure customers that I take their privacy and security seriously? If I were a customer what information would I be looking for?

These and many other questions may spring to mind but it is important that you get these issues clear in your own mind if you are going to be able to present them effectively on your website. One way to achieve this would be to use cards or post-it notes to jot down various headings of the sort of content you believe you will need on your site. Get others to help you if at all possible as this will encourage you to question what may be a rather blinkered approach if you go it alone. Look at other sites in your particular field to get some ideas as well.

Once you have your headings try organising them into logical groups and think about how you will enable customers to find the information, namely your navigation system or menu. On a very simple site consisting of just a handful of pages you may be able to provide links to each page via a single menu strip. On a site where you plan to have 10's of pages you will need to be able to group them under section and sub-section headings in a logical manner which allows users to locate what they are looking for easily and quickly. As a guideline you should aim to keep the most important information on your site within 2 or 3 clicks. If you bury key information any deeper your visitors may leave before getting to the place that encourages them to buy your products or services.

Once you think you have your site's outline structure sorted try asking for some more feedback. Do your testers understand your logical groupings? Have you missed anything? Should some sections appear higher/lower in your hierarchy? Do they get it?

With a clear structure in place you can then concentrate on how best to provide a navigation system for your visitors.

### NAVIGATION

The navigation around your site is accomplished by a series of hyperlinks usually in the form of a menu of some description. The primary menu is commonly in the form of a strip located at the top of a web page or sometimes in columns down either side of the page. You will also see secondary menus that, as the name implies, contain links to pages containing information that, whilst useful, is not considered to be of immediate relevance to your visitors. Nobody is going to want to read all about your terms and conditions or privacy policy as soon as they land on your site, they will want to see what you have to offer in the way of products or services so it is important that these areas are given prominence.



Here are some principles to bear in mind when designing your navigation for your site:

- Navigational text should always stand out. For menu buttons use high-contrast colors and very legible text.
- Don't try to be too clever with obscure icons or symbols. If they have to think really hard about what to do, you've lost them! Customers need to be able to anticipate how your site works without having to learn what to do!
- Use the same navigation model in all your pages because without a consistent design, a user may get confused, lost and frustrated.
- Avoid unusual types of navigation. If you have something that people already know, they deal with it more easily.
- Make your menu links do exactly what they say. Use simple, obvious terms that are easy to figure out. Keep your text short, descriptive, and to the point. If it takes more than a second to figure out then this will contribute to a bad user experience for your visitors.
- You can add a lot of links in a vertical navigation layout, that's why some people prefer it. However, too many items in the primary menu disperse visitor's attention.
- Feedback is essential to any interaction. The moment people click or hover over a menu item make sure to offer an indication of the action. You can do this by changing the link's background color or turn the text bold so that the user is given some positive feedback.
- Put most important items first in the navigation and the least important items in the middle. People's attention is highest for things that appear at the beginning and at the end. The standard location for "Contact" is the end (far right in top-level horizontal navigation).
- You need to make sure your navigation works in different web browsers, including older browsers, on mobile devices, with disabled Javascript, without mouse (e.g. on touch devices such as tablets), and for users with difficulty reading text.
- Avoid adding a sound each time an item in your navigation is rolled over or clicked. Even if you find the sound very interesting it becomes annoying very quickly.
- Don't bury information. Pages on your site should ideally be no farther than three clicks away from any other page.
- Mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones are becoming more and more a popular way of connecting to the Internet. Responsive page design is a good solution for this growing mobile traffic. Single page are automatically restructured to fit on different screen sizes. This also requires a responsive solution for your navigation menu.
- Fix your menu to one place so that it does not disappear when the user scrolls down the page.
- Make sure your menu is easily scalable when you add more content to your site in future.
- Test your navigation with a person familiar with browsing but not related to the design process. Observe their preferences when they navigate through your site and analyze the time it took for them to find the pages that they were looking for.

Navigation plays a key role in creating a great user experience, prolonging the site stay and increasing engagement. Follow these principles to improve your website menu, but remember that every website is unique. So don't afraid to deviate from these rules if you have your reasons. Continue to test and tweak your navigation system and check the difference in your analytics.