

RX FOR A SICK WEB SITE *by Phillip Perry MA*



Your department or school's web site is a great tool for marketing your services or your programs. Over time, however, even the best web site can get sick. Maybe it gets bogged down with too many graphics. Or maybe visitors become confused by new pages that make navigation more difficult.

Or maybe the problem is in performance: You just aren't getting the visitors - and the resultant increase in use of your services, sales of things you might be selling or in the case of a school; enrollment that you had hoped for or need to justify the expense of maintaining the site. What can you do for these and other web site ills? Try these prescriptions:

Symptom #1: Your site's pages are slow to load.

Prescription: Reduce the number and size of your graphics.

People hate slow web sites and may click away from all your great offers if they have to wait longer than a few seconds for your pages to pop onto their computer screens. A fast loading site is particularly important since many people still, believe it or not, access the web using slow dial-up connections. Those people should be able to see your pages in under eight seconds - faster, if possible.

If your web pages are slow to load, chances are you have too many graphics or one or more of your graphics are too large in terms of file size. "A lot of images can slow down a page," notes Warren Smith, director of product marketing at Network

Solutions, a web hosting service based in Herndon, Va. "Try to use no more than six per page. If you stick with that your page will load fast even on dial up."

Keep graphics file sizes small, too. Most pictures with sides less than 300 pixels in length can easily be kept under 20 kilobytes in size. But wait: How about those larger pictures you need to really show off your merchandise and services? No need to forego them, but take this tip from Thomas Neveu, principal of Boston-based Neveu Design. "For important illustrations post small 'thumbnail' pictures which visitors click to open the same photos in larger sizes," he suggests. "When creating the thumbnail be sure to reduce the physical size of the graphics file - don't just scale your larger picture down to fit the thumbnail block." Bonus tip: Do your photos look fuzzy or distorted on your web page? Fix this by indicating the proper width and height dimensions in the web page code.

Symptom #2: Your site is not included in search engine results.

Prescription: Submit your site properly.

We usually expect Google and other big search engines to find our sites automatically. While that sometimes happens, you can't rely on luck when making sure prospective visitors find out about your services.

"Google won't know about your site unless it finds a link to it from somewhere else," says Neveu. "You need to submit your site manually, use an online company that specializes in site submission, or purchase software that automates the process." To submit your site manually, visit the web site for each major search engine and follow its directions. Schedule a return visit every few weeks to make sure that your site doesn't get lost in the shuffle.

Getting the search engines to recognize your site is one thing. Making sure your site ends up toward the top of the resulting search lists is another. And that's important, because visitors will think more highly of a company that achieves the top ranks.

If your web site shows up far down the search list, it's time to take action. "There are many reasons why this could be happening," says Tammy Schultz, president of Virtualtech Web Site Design, Appleton, Wisc. "Very often it's because a web site does not have the right words in the 'meta' tags, which are found in the source code of a site."

Search engines use three meta tags when listing a site: title, description and keyword. The "title" is the most important one but all three should contain your search terms. While many companies rely on the keyword meta tag, the fact is that search engines have recently starting paying less attention to it. That's because spam sites have loaded up their keyword tags with terms that are unrelated to what they have to offer.

Make sure that your most important search terms are included in the actual content of your web site's front page. Search engines pay special attention to content when ranking sites.

Before making any changes to your meta tags, make sure you have a firm knowledge of what search terms your visitors use to find your site. "Don't fall into the trap of misunderstanding what visitors search for," cautions Schultz. "Maybe you use abbreviations or proper terms while your customers use slang."

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Symptom #3: You aren't receiving emails from your site's links.

Solution: Make an online form for communications from visitors.

Most web sites include hyperlinks that visitors can click to generate email to the web site owner. With the growing prevalence of spam filters throughout the Internet, though, many times these email messages are snagged in their tracks and never delivered. They are not really spam, but the filters think they are.

The solution is to include a form that bypasses spam filters. "On my own site's contact form, I have hard coded the line 'Email sent from web site,'" points out Neveu. "I set my spam filters to accept all email with this heading. Now I know that any email sent from my form makes it through."

There's an important bonus to the use of web forms for email, according to Neveu. "People actually prefer forms over regular emails. They can send their messages directly from the web pages without having to wait for their email programs to open."

Symptom #4: Visitors complain that your site is difficult to use.

Prescription: Redesign your pages for visitor friendliness.

Navigating your site is easy. . . for you. That's because you have designed the pages and know what to expect. But how about your visitors? They may be confused about the purpose of your site and which hyperlinks go where.

Here are some suggestion from Schultz:

- Keep links one level deep. When possible, avoid sending visitors more than one layer deep into your web site. It's too easy for people to get lost - and frustrated. That's bad for your business.
- Use straightforward names for menu entries and links. "If you have a page of current services, label the menu item or hyperlink 'Services,'" suggests Schultz. "Don't try to use a clever name that will only confuse your visitors."
- Limit the use of Flash. More sites have started to use the fancy, eye-catching and active graphics available from Flash, a popular design program. In moderation it's great. When over-used, through, it creates problems.

"Someone with a slow connection may have a problem downloading the graphics," notes Schultz. "Worse, the file often requires that visitors have the latest version of Flash installed. That means many of your visitors will have to pause in their work to download the installation files. Needless to say, this can cause many visitors to abandon your site."

Symptom #5: People complain that your site is difficult to read.

Prescription: Adjust your font sizes and colors.

People like to experiment with all kinds of fancy fonts. Unfortunately, many are difficult to read. "Use only Arial, Helvetica, Times New Romans and Courier," suggests Smith. All of these traditional choices are easy on the eyes. Avoid creating odd sized fonts. "Stick with the most common font size of 12 points, which is the default in Word," suggests Smith. "Using sizes that are too big or too small can be incredibly annoying."

While you're at it, adds Smith, change any colors of your fonts and backgrounds that make your text difficult to read. "Some years ago people thought pink would go great with grey," he says. "It's much better to stick with complementary colors. And you can't go wrong with a solid black font against a white or light colored background."

One more thing: Just because your creation looks great on your own monitor doesn't mean it will look that way on everyone's. View your site on several systems. Ask your friends and associates to point out problems when they view your site.

Symptom #6: Your site has broken links and misspelled words.

Solution: Run automated programs to fix problem code.

Sloppy, sloppy! Your department or school can be really have its credibility "damaged" by misspelled words. When visitors see them they start to distrust the quality of your operation. Think about how you would feel about a vendor who sent you a brochure with sloppy text and graphics.

Not everyone's a great speller. Even the best, though, can make mistakes when proof reading a web page. Part of the problem is that our attention tends to get hijacked by the meaning of the sentence and we forget about the need to spot errors.

Schultz offers a solution: "I suggest reading your web pages backwards. Start at the bottom and read from right to left. This forces you to actually read each word and sentence." Bonus tip: Have an associate or friend read your final copy to spot errors you may have missed.

You also want to make sure that hyperlinks don't become broken. This can happen when you move or rename some pages of your site and forget to update the hyperlinks which point to them. It can also happen when pages change on other sites to which your hyperlinks point. The solution is to schedule a weekly or bi-weekly hyperlink check up. A staff member should work through your site, clicking on each hyperlink and making sure it still operates as expected.

Don't trust your skills in these areas? Try one of the automated services that will check your site for you. One popular choice is Website Owner at www.siteowner.com/sitecheck.cfm.

When creating web sites it is easy to get carried away with great ideas about color, graphics and snazzy, action-based interfaces. The fact of the matter is, though, that visitors are just interested in getting the information they came for from a fast-loading site that's easy to use.

Is your own site in good health? Take the 10-point quiz below and see how close to 100 you get. The quiz will help you spot symptoms of a sick web site so you can take steps to get that site back on the road to healthy growth.

Give Your Web Site a Check Up

Score 10 points for each question. How close to 100 are you?

1. Do pages load quickly?
2. Are appropriate terms included in your meta tags?
3. Does your page end up near the top of a search by Google and other search engines?
4. Does your contact form work correctly?
5. Do all hyperlinks work as intended?
6. Does the site appear correctly in all of the major browsers?
7. Is your site free of misspellings?
8. Does the text appear in an attractive font which is easily read?
9. Is all information up to date?
10. Does your site look good on other people's monitors?

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