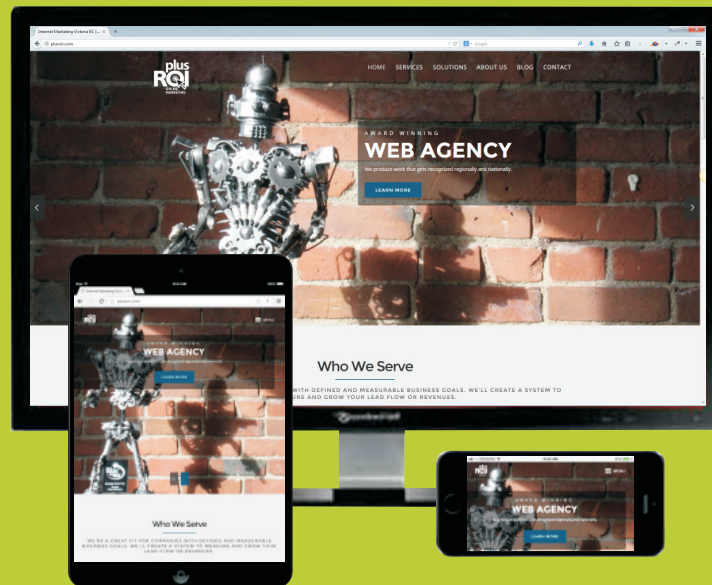




7 CRITICAL COMPONENTS FOR CREATING A SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE

Get in touch with Goals & Strategy, Appropriate Technology, Customer Targeting, Compelling Branding, User Experience, SEO and Analytics and create a successful website.



Introduction

Very few sites live up to their full potential to attract customers, yet having a great website is more important than ever.

The web marketing and web development industry is still a little like the Wild West.

There are no widely accepted professional certifications and it's a real challenge trying to understand all the elements that go into a great site.

On top of that, there are numerous disciplines that go into creating a successful website.

These disciplines include:

- Web Development
- Graphic Design
- Copywriting
- Business and sales strategy
- Search Engine Optimization.
- Analytical expertise.

It's rare to find one person or organization proficient at all of these areas, so the bottom line is that you owe it to yourself to learn enough about the web development process to make sure things get properly taken care of.

Simply put, you need to be able to confidently lead the creation of your website if you want to ensure its success.

With that in mind, let's explore 7 critical components you need to consider so you can launch a successful site...



1) Clear Goals and Strategy

As the saying goes, if you don't know where you're going, any path will get you there.

Sadly, most website projects start with a rough picture of what the website will look like, combined with the idea that it will somehow attract new customers.

Whatever your type of business, you first need to consider:

- **What are your specific goals** (e.g., online sales, more foot traffic to your location, reinforcement for existing customers, information for local shoppers, international exposure for your new product)? With the answer to this question in hand, you can then develop a strategy to achieve these goals.
- **What is a realistic strategy to achieve these goals?** For instance, if you sell mountain bikes, your strategy might be to create detailed pages for each bike model you carry so the respective pages will show up in Google when people within your market search for those specific models.

Alternately, if you want to build exposure for your store instead of specific models, a less detailed but strong "brand-oriented" site might be more appropriate. In either case, your decision will have implications for how you design your site.

If you sell your products nationally or internationally, your strategy will be even more complex.

Also, you want to think of what your future goals are to make sure you organize your site properly for growth. Ideally, you should map out all the sections and pages you might have in 3-5 years if things go well. You're not about to build them all out, but by understanding where you are going you can then "roll them up" and plan a site structure that will be able to grow to support these elements.

Websites that don't incorporate this future planning typically end up getting tossed out and replaced in a few years. This is a real tragedy as there's a lot of "equity" you build up in your site over time and you're way better to grow a site than to keep starting from scratch.



2) Appropriate Technology

Once upon a time if you wanted a website built you'd hire a developer and they would code the whole site. Nowadays, custom development is a critical skill, but there are some great options that require minimal custom coding.

We generally recommend the WordPress content management system. Being by far the most common and actively developed CMS in the world, it is well supported and constantly being upgraded to support the latest web innovations. It's also easy to use for non-techies, yet flexible enough to accommodate nearly any feature you'll need.

Since WordPress is open source and so widely used, there is a massive ecosystem of developers and designers who publish premium themes (design frameworks) and plugins (functionality additions) for WordPress.

Premium themes allow you to leverage the most modern and professional design features, like mobile responsiveness (the ability to change designs for various device screen sizes). Plugins make all sorts of complex functionality and features accessible to the average website owner without having to start coding from scratch. This includes features like:

- Event calendars.
- Ecommerce.
- Booking and reservation systems.
- Private member areas.
- Etc, etc, etc...

Some exceptions to choosing WordPress as your content management system might occur if:

- You want an all-in-one ecommerce solution, in which case a platform like Shopify might be a good way to go.
- You're a Realtor and you're not ready to commit to your own full site, in which case a platform like MyRealPage can be a good value.
- You have very specific technical requirements and you need a custom site/application created. In this case, you might go fully custom or look at slightly more "developer-friendly"

platforms like Joomla or Drupal.

There are a lot of very cheap (and even free) “build it yourself” online platforms available, although it’s hard to recommend them except for short term “proof of concept” sites.

With these sites you don’t actually “own” anything and are at the mercy of any changes to technology or pricing by the vendor.

On the flip side, if you commission a fully custom coded site, you typically “own” your site but there are often fairly proprietary coding techniques used by developers that will make a migration to a different developer near-impossible down the road.

By sticking with a popular platform like WordPress, you have the peace of mind that you will be able to readily find a new developer without any problems.

Lastly, whatever route you go with, you’ll want to pick a website host that is a good match for your technology and traffic volume.

Also, as much as we love supporting local business, with web hosting your best option is usually to pick a large national/international host. They will typically have faster international hosting, better options for hosting, and more redundancy in place to ensure your up-time.

There are many good performance “shared hosts” (where costs are kept down by putting multiple clients on the same server) but if you think you are going to grow you may want to pick a vendor that offers upgrades to more robust and faster dedicated hosting options.



3) Definition & Prioritization of Target Customer Groups

If you have spent any time in retail or other “in person” sales you know that there are different types of customers and that each require a slightly different type of presentation.

The big difference is that, while on the web you still have these different customer types, it’s up to you to create an environment where you allow they can recognize they’ve come to the right place and “self select” their path to information.

Using the simplistic bike shop analogy (I love biking), as a bike shop owner you might serve mountain bikers, roadies and families with kids as three separate customer groups with different needs and motivations. In this case you would likely want a panel for each of them on your home page directing visitors to each respective section.

These panels would include attractive photos that would entice each respective group as well as written copy to entice them to click into their specific section of your site.

It’s also likely that one of these customer groups is more important than the others. This is where prioritization comes into play. You’ll simply want to make sure that you give an appropriate level of prominence on your home page according to the level of priority for each group.

Put so simply, this sounds like some fairly obvious common sense, but it’s amazing how few companies are disciplined enough to set these priorities and make these choices!

For more information on this topic, check out our [blog post on the topic](#).



4) Compelling Branding

This is an area that you definitely want to spend some time on if you want to build trust, build credibility and set appropriate pricing expectations.

Simply put:

- You want to ensure your online look and feel is consistent with what you present off-line from a branding perspective (and hopefully you've done a good job on this front!).
- If you're a pure online company, you'll want to ensure your overall site reflects a look and feel that is consistent with:
 - Your type of product or service.
 - Your values and personality.
 - Your customers' values and personality.

Overall, you'll want to consider:

- Your brand collateral: logos, graphics, photos.
- Your overall "tone" and writing style (you want to be true to your personality and the experience customers will have with you).
- Your balance between photos and text. Sometimes a layout leaning towards richer imagery and less text can support rich visual branding, but may make it more challenging to communicate as much information.

Our own website at PlusROI.com is a good example of this. We made the conscious decision based on our own company experience that a cleaner initial presentation on our home page made more sense for our strategy than trying to present a ton of information above the fold. This has proven to be the right decision for us, but certainly wouldn't be in all cases.

As a general rule of thumb, you don't need to be perfect online, but need to be better than your competition. Your level of investment will vary according to your industry, but it's a very straightforward process to identify your competition online and then ensure that you look as or more professional, inviting and authentic from a branding perspective than they do.



5) Create a Great and Compelling User Experience

To create a great and compelling user experience you need to combine persuasive copywriting with clear paths to the information your visitors are looking for, along with tools to “convert” them to customers or leads.

This is a huge component, but we’ll do our best to break it down into a few practical points.

Incorporate Persuasive Copywriting

Most websites are filled with copy talking about how great their products or services are. Often, this copy is quite well written, but focusing on yourself is NOT the path you want to take.

The bottom line is that customers are not typically looking to hear about how great you are, but rather how you are going to help solve THEIR challenges. To communicate and succeed on this front, you need to become a master of benefit driven copywriting.

One way of going about this is to ask the question “why does it matter?” with each point and getting to the actual benefit rather than the feature.

For instance, if I was selling photo software, a typical feature-driven bullet might say something like “Fast image rendering.”

However, a much more compelling bullet might be to say “Save time - edit photos 20% faster” (assuming you can back this up). In this case, by stating a concrete and meaningful benefit you will be way more compelling than simply stating a feature.

This tactic can be applied to just about any feature – simply keep asking why the features matter to your customers until you fully understand the meaningful benefit.

Design Clear Paths to Information

One of my biggest pet peeves is when companies don’t consider and address the next logical step in a customer’s path. You should be able to look at any page on your site, consider the “state” that a customer is in, and present a clear “call to action” suggesting their next step.

For instance, I was recently reviewing a potential client's website selling seniors' products. They don't sell online, but only through local distributors. If you click through their product categories down through to an individual product, you read through an informative page about their product and then... nothing!

They offer no hints on the page about the next possible step. There's no further links to click for more information and there's no suggestion as to how someone would proceed if they wanted to buy the product.

In this case, the clear path to information would be to have a very prominent link or button presenting the call to action to "find a store near you." This link would then take them right into the "find a store" section of the site where people could immediately find out where to buy.

While it's likely that the many motivated buyers will dig through the navigation to find this information, this site would definitely get more customers into stores by having this information more prominent.

Implement Conversion Tools

If you've ever visited a real estate site and filled in a form to receive a detailed information package, you've experienced a conversion tool in action.

Other tools might include trial downloads, signups for demonstrations, webinars, newsletters, wish lists, etc.

The reason why it's important to have some sort of conversion tool is that unless you have a shopping site made up of low priced items, most visitors to your site are actually in the research phase and NOT yet in the buying phase. At this point, the most strategic things you can do are:

- 1) Show them you are a great choice for what they are looking for.
- 2) Find a way of developing a relationship with them in order that you can stay "top of mind" and/or market to them (i.e. through an email list).

The best conversion tools typically:

- Offer an informational asset that is highly relevant to your product or services.
- Build trust and a relationship rather than trying to sell.

As you've probably figured out, this guide is our own conversion tool. Our assumption is that

anyone interested enough to download this guide could possibly be interested in having a website built at some point!

By earning your permission to include you in our newsletter list by offering you this guide, our hope is that you will come to see us as a credible option to develop your site (and if not, that maybe you'll mention us to someone else).

Many other companies use an approach like this and some companies market much more aggressively than ourselves.

How aggressively you market through inbound marketing and conversion tools is up to you, although it's important to remember that trust is critical online, so you never want to be overly aggressive or you will kill the trust you're working to develop.



6) Proper Search Engine Optimization

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is too complex to go into in great depth in this booklet but there are several areas of SEO you'll want to consider...

On-Site Technical Optimization

On-site technical optimization is critical when developing your website. This does not involve executing on an SEO strategy, but rather ensuring that your site is developed in a manner that it will support your SEO efforts (startlingly, many are not).

Unless you do some research and learning, it's unlikely you'll become knowledgeable enough to succeed at this yourself or to tell if your website developer is doing your technical optimization properly.

To help on that front, there's a great guide to SEO published by Google and available through [this link](#). Google is not known for publishing easy to understand documents, but this one is extremely well presented.

This guide is useful because:

- It can give you a good understanding of SEO.
- If you don't care to read it, you can refer to it and specify to your web developer that they must follow all the basic conventions laid out in the document!

Content and Page Optimization

This involves identifying the sort of keywords and search queries your customers are using to research your type of products and services. You then optimize your pages to use your customers' language, write about what they are looking for and make sure Google can find your content.

You'll also want to look at developing a strategy for adding and optimizing fresh, relevant content to your site on an ongoing basis if SEO is part of your strategy.

Offsite SEO and Engagement

This involves all the extra work you need to do if you want to be strong in SEO. It involves making sure there are links to your website from all relevant sites and directories, building relationships in social media, having folks share your content, and having other relevant sites and blogs tell people about you and link to your site.

Bear in mind that Google has gotten extremely efficient at detecting trickery in SEO. You should avoid any services that talk about taking advantage of the Google algorithm and focus on responsible online engagement to build your presence through legitimate relationships with other sites, blogs and social media properties.

You should also be aware that there are platforms and practices in fairly common use which are not SEO-friendly.

One very relevant current example is that of single page sites where you can scroll through the entire site or jump between anchor points on the single page.

While these sites can look visually stunning, they typically stink from an SEO perspective!

Also, while you can address your content optimization and offsite optimization after you've built your site, it's absolutely critical that you get your site built properly from a technical optimization perspective right from the start, unless you want to be handicapped in all your other efforts.



7) Tracking and Measurement

Imagine if you owned a large retail store and could know where most every customer came from, what they looked at in the store, which department drove them away and which advertising sources generated the most profit.

While this would be very challenging in a traditional environment, you can do all of this with your website and it doesn't even cost anything.

By employing a free tool like Google Analytics, you can measure, test and improve website performance dramatically.

While larger sites typically look at every dozens of data elements and use them to improve, even smaller sites can leverage data to make better decisions.

The most profitable way to leverage Analytics typically involves:

1. Measuring online sales volumes
OR
2. Setting "goals" on the site that are tracked when a potential customer does something that will be likely to have value down the road.

With the above in place, you can then tag your links used in different advertising and even in other areas like email and social media. You can then look and see exactly which of your "sources" are generating web traffic that results in people either buying or completing one of the goals you've specified.

Non sales goals often include things like getting someone to send in a request for quotation, filling out a contact form, downloading a trial, signing up for a newsletter, etc.

By measuring this you can very accurately determine your return on investment for your different promotional efforts, growing the ones that are working and killing the ones which are not.

You'll definitely want to ensure you get Analytics and goals set up properly on your website if you are remotely serious about succeeding with your web efforts.



Conclusion

In a single document we can only scratch the surface on many of the topics we discuss here. However, if you at least consider each one while you're planning your website you'll be well ahead of the vast majority of your competitors.

We appreciate you taking the time to read this and we hope you stay subscribed to our Online Marketing Insights newsletter so you can find out when we publish more guides like this.



Want Some Help?

It would be our pleasure to chat with you about strategies you might consider for building a new site or improving your existing one.

It doesn't cost you anything to talk to us and we guarantee you'll learn something new about your business on the web.

The best way to get in touch is to email me directly at Rob@PlusROI.com



About The Author

Rob has worked as a full time online marketer since 2001 and launched PlusROI Online Marketing in 2007. He speaks regularly in Canada and the US on web marketing topics and favors a practical, common sense approach to the web.

In his time online, he's looked under the hood at many hundreds of sites, ranging from tiny startups to some of the busiest sites on the web.