

Technology Judging Technology – Website Design Not Ready for Primetime

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A few weeks ago, StepForth's sales manager, Bill Stroll, took a well deserved holiday. That gave me the opportunity to sit in his chair for a few days, monitoring emails from clients and queries from potential clients. My primary focus was to answer client questions and respond to information requests that simply couldn't wait until Bill was back at his desk.

Sitting in front of his computer gave me a chance to take another look a random sampling of websites interested in SEO. From time to time, I tabbed over to see some of the [site-review questionnaire](#) responses our system had recently handled.

Search engine optimization is obviously becoming more popular. We're handling a lot more review requests. Many of the sites processed by our review system were already well-designed sites ready for optimization. Many others however, were simply not up to a standard of design or topical clarity in which our SEO services would help. It's a hard thing to tell someone but someone has to do it, the website needs to be redesigned.

Online competition has increased dramatically year after year. Today there are more websites doing business in every commercial sector than there were yesterday. Though the search engines are better able to sort information and rank relevant sites against keyword queries, achieving search engine placements for smaller sites has gotten more difficult as the environment evolves.

Recent changes to the ranking algorithms at Google and Yahoo place increased importance on site user experience, making people-friendly web design an important component in SEO. Because the search engines want to gauge the usefulness of any given document or link, they track the movement of visitors from one web document to another. When larger numbers of visitors travel to a site and spend more time gathering information and following its links, the search engines tend to think favorably about that site. Similarly, when visitors click in and quickly click out, their leaving is noted and the action is somewhat scored against the site. It's nothing personal, its just technology judging technology.

When a website is somehow unprepared to meet the standards we believe search spiders or human visitors are looking for, we call it not-ready-for-primetime. It's a much gentler term to use than others we've tossed about. Not-ready-for-primetime sites come in all shapes, sizes and represent all sorts of businesses. The one thing they have in common is that, in their current condition, their chances of achieving strong search rankings are dim. They are often constructed as if they were afterthoughts, as brochures by people focused squarely on doing business in the real world.

When we come across sites that are not quite ready for primetime, we tend to recommend site redesign. The problem with recommending redesign as a pre-requisite of SEO work is that it needs to be factored into a preset marketing budget. Often, site owners are unable or unwilling to invest in site redesign and either go seeking help or affirmation from other search marketing shops, or give up altogether.

The easiest way to avoid presenting an unfriendly face to search engine spiders is to start from the basics and work your way up. Here are a few quick tips on spotting elements of your website that might not be as search engine friendly as they could or should be.

Every website, good or bad begins with a site structure. Some structures are better for search spiders than others. There are two areas to consider when thinking about site structure, regardless of the eventual size of the site. The first how the overall site file and directory tree will look. The second is how the first few levels of that tree will be laid out.

The overall site should be structured to allow for long-term growth. As more files or documents are added to the site, the designer will want to ensure that search spiders will find those files without too much trouble. That means limiting the number of directory levels as much as practically possible.

The first few levels of a site are extremely important for strong search rankings. Documents or files found on the first few pages of any site tend to contain the most unique, descriptive content. These documents are most likely to receive incoming links from other sites and are most likely to be entrance points to specific product or services offered on pages found deeper in the site. Establishing easily followed paths for search spiders and for live-visitors is important.

The next thing that makes a site not-ready-for-primetime is topical focus and clarity of message. In a competitive search engine environment, choosing a theme and sticking to it is generally good advice.

We often see sites that try to sell hundreds of unrelated consumer items or travel services. These types of sites pose two problems. First, there is no overall theme to think about when determining keywords to target. Secondly, much of the content on sites like this is lifted from other online sources, likely already existing in Google's index.

If these sites were to segment their sites into niches or facets of the industries they are trying to represent and build a number of sites dedicated to those facets, chances are their sites would perform much better on the search engines.

Another series of elements that can make a site not-ready-for-primetime is found in previous attempts at search engine or network marketing. A reality of web-based business is that a little information can be extremely dangerous if applied incorrectly. We often come across sites that have joined web-rings or link-exchanges, or have remnants of spammy SEO techniques left over from a previous run-in with less ethical SEOs. We tend to see these sites just after they have been delisted or have seen their rankings degrade over time.

A site redesign is a serious commitment. Once it is undertaken, a whole range of planning, copywriting and meetings are in order. This process is often good for an online business as it forces the business to focus on how it conducts business online, and how to make that business better.

Perhaps the truest measure of the need to redesign a website comes not from the needs of website marketers but from the experience of the website owners themselves. Is the site producing revenues or attracting business of some form or another? Is it capable of returning some if not all of the money invested in it? If not, the best search engine placements on the Internet are not going to be much use.

The need for [search friendly design](#) is obvious, the demand is real.