Website Development Guideline

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1) **Decide on the platform type – Hosting Agnostic v Hosting Dependent.**
   a. Start the website development project by deciding on type of content management system (CMS), this is the engine of your website. Whether you go platform agnostic v platform dependent will determine which platform or CMS is right for you.
   b. Foundational pieces to understand
      i. *Hosting v registrar:* The domain registrar is who you buy your domain name from (i.e. www.yourdomainname.com). The hosting account is what you will use to actually host your website and files. At times the two can be the same, but with changes in hosting plans and performance, you should always retain the freedom to move hosting to better platforms.
      ii. *Top level domains (TLD):* The most common top-level domains are .com, but there are also .net, .biz, .us and many more. Generally, if you are a commercial entity, you should be getting a ".com" website, if that is not at all possible, the next best thing is ".net." If you are a nonprofit, the appropriate TLD is ".org."
         1. There are additional special cases TLD specific to technology companies such as .io, .app, .tech , etc…
   c. Platform Agnostic: a content management system (CMS) that is not dependent on any hosting provider.
      i. Pros: Flexibility to move website, generally has larger install base, you own the content outright, more flexible and greater scalability options, highly customizable, easy access to source code (HTML, CSS, JS), generally cheaper to find good developers, easy third party integration. Also, far more robust analytics options.
      ii. Cons: Limited managed services or SLA. Has a lot more flexibility, which can mean less structure to start. Requires a more technical understanding which brings a steeper learning curve.
      iii. Popular options: Webflow, Joomla, Drupal, WordPress (which is the most popular CMS in the world).
   d. Platform Dependent: a content management system (CMS) that is tied to the hosting platform on which it is offered (also referred to as **website builders)** is a way for hosting companies to retain you for life.
      i. Pros: Do not require coding, drag-and-drop interface, managed services or SLA and more structured, easy to use.
      ii. Cons: No scalability, severely limited SEO, severely limited analytics. You are locked into the hosting platform, can never migrate, smaller install base means less competition in developers.
      iii. Popular options: Wix, SquareSpace, GoDaddy Site Builder
   e. Criteria for deciding which way to go:
      i. If you have website development experience or the resources to hire developers, CMS is a better option. Additionally, If you need scalability or work in a competitive market or need to have robust analytics or planning campaigns with moderate to complex organic and paid search – Go with platform agnostic.
         1. Example: You are services company, a retail store doing a digital pivot or a product company or just about any kind of business that has a competitive landscape and needs robust digital marketing needs.

ii. If you do not have any coding experience and need a quick site build, do not foresee much in growth or scalability or expect to have much in SEO for reaching new markets and don't rely heavily on digital channels for new business. Or, you are a very small niche retail or services company that is location dependent and have an established customer base that just needs a web presence to serve existing customers or new customers acquired primarily by foot traffic

1. Example: A neighborhoods take-out restaurant or specialized retail. Could also be good for freelancers to showcase value and services like photography or similar offerings.

2) **Decide on the actual platform or CMS.**
   a. If going with hosting dependent:
      i. Wix
         1. Can be free or paid. Paid version has support.
         2. Site can be built from pre-designed templates.
         3. Create layouts with drag and drop features.
         4. Easy to quickly stand up a site.
      ii. Squarespace
         1. There is no free option. Paid option has support included.
         2. Includes domain and hosting plan if you choose to go with an annual plan
         3. Flexible with tool options for monitoring.
         4. Can use website templates to quickly change look and feel.
      iii. GoDaddy Site Builder
         1. Similar to above
      iv. Strikingly
         1. Similar to above
   b. If going with hosting agnostic option:
      i. WordPress – The most popular CMS in the world. It is open source, scalable, has limitless SEO abilities, huge developer community, has its own plugin marketplace and probably the best option for nearly any web project. Can be suitable for any size business from solo to corporation.
      ii. Joomla – Great CMS with powerful features for portal design and website functions of nearly any kind. It is more complex to manage and edit. Can be suitable for small to large companies, it does have a learning curve and may need a semi-dedicated resource.
      iii. Drupal – Powerful CMS which has probably the best integration and development functions, great for security as well. It is preferred for large site development projects. Can be suitable for medium to large companies, it does require dedicated resources to properly manage.
      iv. Caution: Avoid asp.net CMS as a general rule unless you have a very specific need and have the resources and dedicated development team to support it. Examples of this category of CMS are DotNetNuke or Umbraco. These require Windows servers as opposed to Linux, which are a hassle to manage, not as fast and expensive to maintain.

3) **Decide on how you are going to develop the site.**

a. Outsource Completely – Engage a developer or development company to fully manage the design and development of your website project.
   i. Before you begin
      1. Decide on platform, purpose of site, rough content map and how much you like to invest. Mason SBDC can provide counseling to help you understand it. You should have a project needs defined before engaging with vendors.
      2. If sourcing a developer, it is always a good practice to get multiple quotes, at least three is recommended. Mason SBDC counselors can help with reviewing the quotes and proposals once you obtain them.
   ii. Mason SBDC Referrals
      1. Use developers engaged by Mason SBDC in the past and are in good standing. We have a separate list of current referral companies available for your review.
      2. These vendors have worked with Mason SBDC counselors in the past, but each should be evaluated in depth for particular projects. Mason SBDC makes no guarantee of their work and are not affiliated with them.
      3. Mason SBDC can provide contact information in a separate referral sheet.
      4. The vendors can develop projects end to end. But will still need your input and vision to deliver.
      5. Cost varies based on the vendor and type of project needed. It is highly recommended that you evaluate these vendors in-depth to your needs and fit.
   iii. UpWork
      1. Project level outsourcing for freelancers and small development teams.
      2. Global market of talent
      3. Projects are managed and paid for on the platform.
      4. Service providers are motivated by ratings and reviews.
      5. Should develop a project brief and outline as much as you know and want. Make sure you are clear on exactly what you want done in the project.
      6. Avoid ambiguous technology, goals and deliverables.
      7. Not well suited using as a strategy or ideation resource.
      8. Recommend working with Mason SBDC to develop the needs document to solicit bids on UpWork.
      9. Look for service providers with track record of projects similar to your needs, high ratings and carefully review the comments and recommendations.
   iv. LinkedIn ProFinder
      1. Similar to UpWork
      2. Marketplace for finding talent. Unlike UpWork, more focused on individuals.
      3. Use the platform to find people with skills, backgrounds, and project history similar to your needs.
      4. Be concise on your needs before engaging.
      5. Carefully review the ProFinder profiles and the developers LinkedIn Profile.
      6. Feel free to ask for a portfolio and reference call with previous clients.

b. Partially Outsource – Define exact deliverables that you need that are outside of your abilities and use micro-lancing sites to find talent to complete.
   i. Before you begin, decide on the platform and type of CMS you need, map out broadly what you need done and what you want to do yourself. You should have a project needs document that succinctly defines the tasks needed to complete your project. Mason SBDC can help you better plan for this approach with a counseling session.
   ii. Fivrr
      1. A task based freelancing marketplace with a global talent pool.
      2. Best used for precisely defined tasks. Not for strategy or ideation.
      3. Vendors are motivated by rating and reviews. Should review their ratings, offering and reviews carefully.
      4. For a typical website development project, expect to have between 2-8 tasks, depending on your need and site scope.
   iii. LinkedIn ProFinder
      1. Similar to UpWork
      2. Marketplace for finding talent. Unlike UpWork, more focused on individuals.
      3. Use the platform to find people with skills, backgrounds and project history similar to your needs.
      4. Be concise on your needs before engaging.
      5. Carefully review the ProFinder profiles and the developers LinkedIn Profile.
      6. Feel free to ask for a portfolio and reference call with previous clients.
c. DIY – Do the project with no or very limited outside help
   i. Before you begin: Map out what you want in terms of platform and technology. See if you have the time and skills to develop it. For most site projects, even moderate amount of technology experience is sufficient for completing but be sure you give yourself time to complete. The typical website project does not require direct coding, more about effectively using platforms and interfaces.
   ii. To better understand the level of effort, skills and time requirements Mason SBDC can help with a counseling session.

4) **Ecommerce Websites – Special Case**
   a. Ecommerce websites can be a special case, they have specific requirements and options to consider. To quickly launch an ecommerce website, use the following options:
      i. Shopify.com – a turnkey ecommerce platform that has a large plugin and partner marketplace. The design and layout are very user friendly and has integration with nearly every payment, shipping and even fulfillment platform. It is a platform dependent solution. It is one of the most used ecommerce solutions on the market. They offer several pricing options, pick the one best suited for your needs.
      ii. WooCommerce – Is an opensource option for ecommerce websites, it can be used in conjunction with WordPress. While not turnkey, it is a solid platform that is best used in conjunction with WordPress. Unlike Shopify, it has the advantage of working closely with WordPress which makes this a very versatile option.

  b. For any ecommerce solution, you will need to consider payment and shipping solutions. The above are very well regarded and can be used with a variety of options.

5) **Success Tips**

  a. Content can-not be outsourced. You should expect to develop and write your own content and you know your business the best.

  b. Templates are your friend. It is rare that a web project needs to be designed from complete scratch. Most any website can benefit from leveraging templates. This helps to cut down on design time and cost. Templates are bought as complete packages with all that is needed to make the template work, including placeholder content.

  c. The goal should be to reach MVP, not perfection. A website a live project which is supposed to be iteratively improved and grown. Aim to develop and go live with the MVP as version 1 and plan to continue working and developing with less time and effort afterwards. Never let a website go stale, as that is a waste of all time and resources spent in developing the website.

  d. Graphics can be a substantial money drain. The goal should be to use as many cost and royalty free graphics as possible. You should only consider premium or paid graphics for a very limited number of images. Also, please keep the images in .png format for best performance. They should also be resized to actual container need and not uploaded at full size.

  e. Hosting is going to be a major determinant of SEO success. It is one of the areas that investment is fully justified. You should avoid shared hosting, instead opt for managed hosting, particularly if you are going the WordPress route.

  f. SEO is a whole different challenge and discipline onto itself. But at the website development stage, the only consideration should be to pick a platform that has robust SEO options and invest in an appropriate hosting plan.

  g. Content is the fuel for any website. As part of the development plan, should have a content plan as well. At the very basic, should plan to have some sort of content calendar in place, even if it is not feeding any paid campaigns, it needs to be feeding site content updates.

  h. Mason SBDC has resources to help plan out projects with counselors that have extensive experience to help you properly plan and develop website.

6) **Links to assist with your website development project**
   a. Popular hosting and registrar companies
      i. CNet hosting guide for 2021 - https://www.cnet.com/news/best-web-hosting/
      ii. Godaddy.com
      iii. Siteground.com
      iv. Dreamhost
      v. Bluehost.com
      vi. Hostgator.com
   b. Full and partial outsource platforms for talent
      i. https://www.fiverr.com/
      ii. https://www.upwork.com/
      iii. https://business.linkedin.com/grow/profinder
   c. Resources for NonProfits
      i. https://taprootfoundation.org/ - talent/time donation for causes
      ii. https://www.techsoup.org/ - Technology sourcing for nonprofits