

Eight Legs of a Web Site Core Elements of a Web Site That Works

By Drew Zagorski
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Site builder tools. They're great and they've made having a web site affordable and easy to build (some of them, anyway) for countless professionals and businesses. And if you cruise the web for a bit, it won't take you long to spot someone who has done the 'affordable and easy to build' thing... attempted to cobble together a web site. I did a search for a plumber in a certain city and came across a 'Joe the Plumber' web site... I've blocked out the city name, website and phone numbers to protect the innocent.

As you can see, Joe's web site was certainly affordable - he likely didn't engage any help from anyone in building it. Affordable, yes. But at what cost?

And it was probably 'easy to build,' though I bet Joe spent the better part of a day putting it together. How many hours and at what billable rate?

Now don't get me wrong. Site builders and template sites are the right solution for many people and businesses, but if the site doesn't have the core elements that will make it stand up, it's almost better to have no web site at all.

Here are the nine core elements every web site should have behind it...

The Story

Using the right words will help to engage, entertain, educate, and most importantly, persuade visitors to your site to do business with you. Your story needs to be about them, not you. Take a look at Joe's copy (top of next column).

Earnest, certainly. But as you read it, it almost sounds desperate. It's all about Joe and has nothing to do with you resolving your needs. And lastly, even though it's all about Joe, it does nothing at all to differentiate Joe from any other plumber. He's not



Hi, my name is Joe. I have been in the plumbing trade for about 13 years. I am experienced in all areas of residential service and repair. I will always run a fair and honest business. I sell only high quality materials and will stand behind them if ever there is an issue. All labor and parts come with a standard one-year warranty, and it is clearly noted on my invoices. I am not out to sell you something you don't need and I am happy to install anything you would wish to supply. I will listen to you about your plumbing issues and then we can discuss options. If you have any plumbing questions, please feel free to answer any questions you may have. I can provide you with any new plumbing fixtures you may require, or I can simply repair what you presently have in your home, if you would prefer. I offer free estimates to replace your existing main water service from the City water meter to your house. I believe 100% customer satisfaction comes first. Thank you for your interest. Joe The Plumber

telling us anything that any other plumber would tell us.

Remember that the words you put on the page will have a positive or negative impact on the reader. Take the time to get your story right and make it about your audience rather than yourself. Make it emotional (yes, plumbing can be emotional!). Use your story to differentiate yourself up front and put all the 'table stakes' language (experience, great service, quality, etc.) in it's appropriate place - in a side bar, at the bottom of the page or in on an About page.

Read your web site copy and ask the following questions to yourself:

- Does my copy talk more about me than my audience?
- Could my web copy apply to anyone who does what I do/sells what I sell?
- Have I differentiated myself at all (while keeping the focus on the audience)?

If you answered Yes, Yes and No, you need to rework your content.

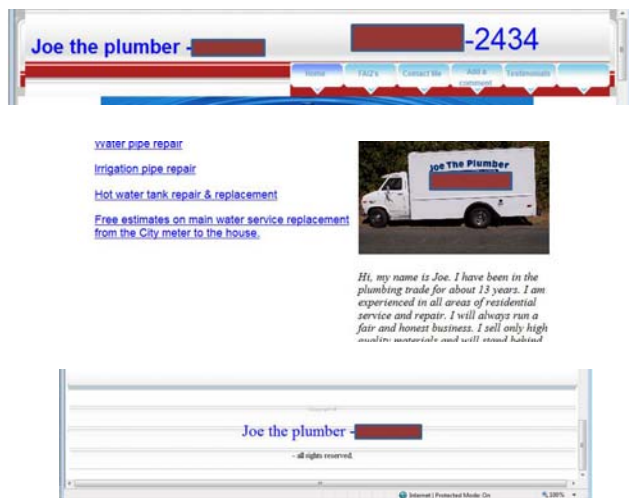
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Well Designed

OK, so templated, site-builder sites handle the design of the site for you. But, if you choose a bad layout or attempt to do things with the layout because you know 'enough HTML' to be dangerous, odds are you'll cause problems with the site's design.

Take a look at three specific areas of Joe's site... The header is out of alignment; the body content is not balanced well; and the footer is a jumbled mess. Is this how Joe will handle your leaky pipes?



Keep the design clean and don't try to mess with the code that your site builder give you access to, unless you've got the help of someone who really knows what they're doing. You don't want a plumber building your web site, right? Think about the content on the page and keep your main content in the center of the page. Keep your site and the number of pages within the limits of what your site builder allows. And if you're working with a web designer or agency to build a custom site, make sure you've got them lined up (or another web design pro) to handle the ongoing maintenance.

Optimized

SEO is king when it comes to people finding you. Make sure your site is well optimized for search engines. Do your keyword research with tools such as Google's AdWords Keyword tool or Wordtracker. Don't rely on what you believe your keywords should be. You're too close to your business and think of it in technical terms. Keyword tools do a pretty good job of showing you what words and phrases people actually use to find. Make sure you've got your title, keyword and

description tags dialed in. Most site builder tools will allow you to edit at least these three tags. And use your footer to include key words and geography information - if it's relevant and doesn't abuse good form this is a great optimization tool.

Solve It, Don't Sell It

I don't know many folks who enjoy having a high pressure sales pitch in their face. Going too far in the direction of selling your wares can turn a lot of people off. Just go to <http://www.shamwow.com> and you'll get the idea. Show your audience in your story that you understand them, their need and that you have a solution for them. Take a look at <http://www.microfibergreen.com>. It's essentially the same product as Shamwow, but a very different approach to how the story is delivered.

Shamwow puts the gun to your head. MicrofiberGreen actually communicates with you to illustrate they understand what's important (eco-friendly) and educate (they also have an FAQ page). If you're like most people, you'll be more receptive to the MicrofiberGreen page because it's not a force-fed message.

Remember: The purpose is to engage, educate, entertain and persuade. If you do these things, you'll show that you can solve the problem for your audience, so the selling comes more naturally.

Dumb It Down

You're an expert at what you do. Your audience isn't. Telling your story in overly technical terms, chock full of industry specific language and a flood of statistics and other data will either bore or turn off your audience, or worse, make them feel dumb. So dumb it down and put things in 'layman's' terms so anyone will easily understand what it is you have to say. That said, you can include your techno-speak if it really makes you feel validated, but put it in an appropriate, well-labeled place (for instance, a page named Technical Specifications).

Dumb It Down II

If there's no alternative to using technical terms, provide link to a glossary or put the definition in parenthesis right next to the term. The better of the two is a link as you can make the term an in context link, which will be beneficial for search engine optimization purposes.



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Intuitive Navigation

So you've got 16 pages of content. Don't make all of them top level navigation items. Try to keep your top level navigation to 5 to 8 items. Then place the other content under those top levels. Use the top of the page and the side, either left or right of the content. Whenever possible use text navigation, versus graphics as this will help the SEO cause. So, in this example, of the 16 pages, you can set 8 as top navigation across the header of your page and place all of them along the side navigation. Also, include a site map page, especially if you have lots of content. It's a good SEO strategy and a lot of people will appreciate the ability to navigate with that tool.

Make the Connection

Guess what? Joe did do something right with his site... It's no problem finding his phone number as it's at the top and bottom of every page, big and bold. If you've gone to the trouble of building content that connects with your audience, putting a great design in place and crafting navigation that makes it easy for visitors to get around, you're totally dropping the ball if they can't figure out how to contact you. Make it as easy for them as possible. Put your email and phone number in your header and footer. Include address information in the footer and use the space under the side navigation to include your complete contact information as well. And, include your phone number in a call to action. These elements should be on every page. There's no excuse for missing an opportunity because someone couldn't find your phone number or email address.

A note about email links versus forms... My take on this is that it's a toss of a coin. Most web site owners I know rarely get inquiries from an email form or link that comes from their web site. More often than not, if a visitor is interested, they'll call you. Some have made the argument that they don't want their email address on the site because of spammers. It's true that spammers abuse email links, but they also are savvy enough to also hit web contact forms, so there's no real safe haven. Set up an info@ address if you can and use that for your email contact.

Your First and Only Impression

People are busier than ever and don't have a whole lot of time to do deep exploration when it comes to the web. When they visit or land on your site it's often the first and only impression you make on them. If it's poorly built and written, like Joe's site, the odds are you'll quickly click on to the next site. Take the time to put the right legs on your web site and look at it as an investment rather than something you can do 'quick and dirty.' Your ability to capture new business depends on it.

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