

5 principles of effective websites

The rapid adoption of the Internet has been impacting the community at large. In Hong Kong, the number of Internet users today has reached nearly 4.9 million, which accounts for 68% of total population, as revealed by the report, *We are Social - 2012 Social, Digital and Mobile in Asia*. In addition, according to the “.hk Website Utilisation Survey” conducted by HKIRC in August 2012, 36% of websites in the survey were updated within six months before the Survey began, a five-fold increase compared to 2010, demonstrating the increasingly important role of websites in businesses.

Moreover, there are many .hk websites demonstrating the use of best practices from the 2012 “Top 10 .hk Website Competition” results announced in April. The Competition had four categories, including “commercial”, “non-commercial”, “Government departments” and “LegCo members” websites. The entries were evaluated according to four judging criteria, namely overall design and functionality, engagement, use of social media and web accessibility. Among the entries, nearly 80% of commercial websites have used social media to communicate with customers. Over 80% of the government websites have incorporated “accessibility” elements to cater to the needs of the disadvantaged groups.

In today’s business world, a website is as necessary as a phone, if not more. As a virtual shop front, your website enables customers to find you and connect with you at all times. A website is not only your online presence; it is also an efficient and cost-effective way to promote your products and services to customers all over the world. The costs of creating an initial website is not high; it’s about HK\$10,000 for design, development and set-up and, in most cases less than HK\$260 a year on average for hosting and maintaining the website. On the other hand, a start-up needs to spend more than HK\$350,000 for setting up a physical office¹. Ultimately, a website is a more cost-effective tool for efficiently reaching out to potential markets and standing out from the crowd in an ever-changing dynamic environment.

But how do you build a good website? We believe that an effective website should be built on five principles, namely the level of interactions with online users, web accessibility elements, content updates and ease of use, integration with social media and security measures.

1. **High level of interaction with online users**

Integrating a blog, twitter feed or Q&A section with your website are good

examples of building a close communication with online users, allowing them to join your discussions and comment on your articles. This is a great way to build relationships and share information. If visitors feel that your website is a useful source of information, they will more likely come back. For example, Darizi (www.darizi.com.hk), Deals Hong Kong (www.dealshongkong.hk) and Photoblog (www.photoblog.hk), the winners of this year's competition, have made good use of online forums and message boards to accept posts and comments, resulting in more interactions with customers. On the other hand, Travel Expert's website (www.travelexpert.com.hk) enables users to get instant information via its online chat room.

2. *Implement web accessibility elements*

Web accessibility means that the website content is available for all, including persons with disabilities or specific difficulties. An accessible website not only helps deliver messages to various audiences, but also enhances the experience for all users in the community and cultivates a caring and inclusive society. For example, the website of Hong Kong Society for the Aged (www.e123.hk) demonstrates effective use of web accessibility by catering to the needs of the elderly and disabled people. Also, Radio Television of Hong Kong (www.rthk.hk) and Kowloon Motor Bus (www.kmb.hk) implement effective web accessibility features such as, font resizing, captioning for graphics and videos, as well as providing text only versions to meet different user needs.

3. *Keep the website updated and easy to use*

A website can be an incredible tool to communicate your information and market your product and service to prospects around the globe. It is crucial to present the content clearly and adopt a more user-friendly design. A regularly updated website can keep visitors coming back frequently and help boost its rankings by the popular search engines. In addition, the content flow should be easy to follow and the information accurately categorised, helping visitors easily locate the information that they are seeking. Providing bilingual contents can also help reach more global readers, as well as cater to the diversified cultural groups of Hong Kong.

4. *Integrate with social media*

Local companies from different industries have successfully enhanced their customer relations via social media by using Facebook and Sina Weibo, for example. However, to make a bigger business impact, companies should

make sure to integrate their social media presence into their websites. For .hk websites, the social media element still needs more attention. According to the Survey, only 15% of .hk websites adopted social media. Ultimately, enterprises that fully utilise various social media channels will be able to reach more potential customers in the digital marketplace.

5. ***Safeguard your website***

Last but not least, web security is an important principle for a good website. With cybercrime evolving rapidly and posing an ever-increasing threat to the Internet community, organisations need to enhance their online security systems to prepare for different types of attacks. Good websites should provide free-from-virus hyperlinks and have good security measures to protect their database.

To conclude, a website is an online presence of a company or an organisation. Without a well-thought-out plan and strategy, a company can harm its branding or even the whole business. Operating a website is a long-term commitment. Once you make your initial investment and have your website up and running, the bigger challenge is to keep it up-to-date and cater to the needs of your existing and potential customers.

¹*According to example from Support and Consultation Centre for SMEs of the Trade and Industry Department*

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