

Planning Your Website

What is your website about?

A nice simple question but one that will impact upon everything else you do. Even the biggest of sites can be summarised easily and ideally you can describe what your site is about in one simple sentence.

As you build your site you will be tempted by shiny new widgets or flashy graphics you stumble across which can easily lead to you going off topic or creating a confused site.

The answer to this question is essentially your mission statement and will help you to maintain focus throughout the development process.

Mission statement examples:

"Organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful."

- Google

"To provide a global trading platform where practically anyone can trade practically anything."

- eBay

"To build a place where people can come to find and discover anything they might want to buy online."

- Amazon

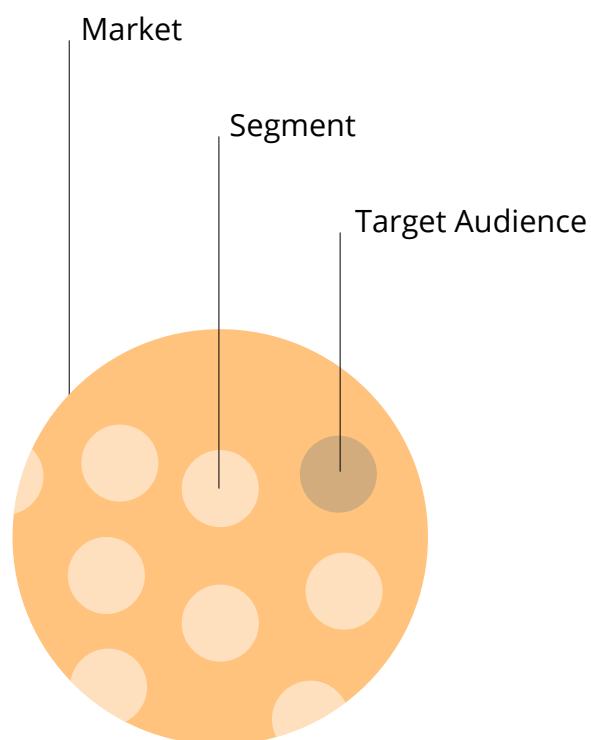
Segment, target & position

Every market, no matter how small, has multiple segments with one or more unifying characteristics. The art is to identify those you want to target and then position your site in such a way that they respond to it positively.

Segmenting your market

The categories below are not mutually exclusive and you can mix and match to your heart's content...

- **Demographic** - Age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, occupation...
- **Geographic** - Country, County, city, town, size of population...
- **Behavioural** - Benefits sought, Occasions (e.g. Christmas), usage rate, price



- Tone of voice
- Where you advertise
- Navigation
- Services offered
- Prices
- Products Sold
- Method of Contact
- Colours used
- How you advertise
- Your logo
- Depth of content
- Everything!

It is likely you will do a lot of this unconsciously and you don't have to sit down and draw up a business plan General Motors would be proud of, but make sure you always keep your audience in the back of your mind whenever you make a decision.

Market research

Unless you are first to market you will be competing with other websites for people's eyeballs and loyalty. To avoid reinventing the wheel take advantage of their hard work and have a look at what they have done and sign up to any newsletters / marketing

- How have they structured their website?
- What tone of voice do they use?
- What services / extras do they offer?
- What can you do differently / better?
- What are their product features / prices?
- How do they promote themselves (new and existing visitors / customers)?

Note: This isn't to suggest you should copy any design work or web copy just take inspiration from what is good and fill any gaps you see.

To see how active they are marketing themselves and gaining brand exposure use Google's web search, news search and blog search. To find out which sites are linking to them use Yahoo's site explorer <http://siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com/>. It is also worth looking at their meta-description and meta-keywords. Although they no longer influence the large search engines, they are still useful in helping to drive visitors to your site.

How to view a sites meta-description & keywords:

- Go to their website
- In your web browser click on 'File' > 'Source'
- The meta data is always in between the `<head></head>` tags online

Search results

Conduct a series of searches using your market's core search terms:

- Which sites are ranked highest organically?
- Which sites are advertising using PPC?
- Are any user feedback / comments ranked highly and what do they say?
- Who are the big directories / forums / blogs in your market?

Forums, blogs & niche social networks

Have a look around the social media sites that cater for your target audience and see what people are saying about their current providers, both positive and negative (e.g. "I wish they gave me xyz as well" or "Mine has been so quick in responding to me"). From this you can see where the gaps are and what people consider to be important.

Choosing a domain name & hosting

Picking a domain name

You'll find a warehouse's worth of content online offering advice and guidance about choosing a domain name, but to be frank it's not that hard. The difficulty lies in finding one that is actually available!

A good domain name should be 3 things:

1. Easy to remember
2. Easy to type
3. Relevant to your service or brand

Ideally it should also still have the .com, co.uk & .net available to prevent you losing traffic and anyone cyber-squatting on one of the big three domain extensions in the UK.

You will find that a lot of descriptive domain names already have the .com taken and possibly the co.uk as well. An alternative to both options described above is to create a name that could not possibly have been taken and build your brand around that. Existing examples include Ning.com, Meebo.com & Flickr.com.

Example:

- online-flower-delivery-service-york.co.uk
- yorkflowers.co.uk

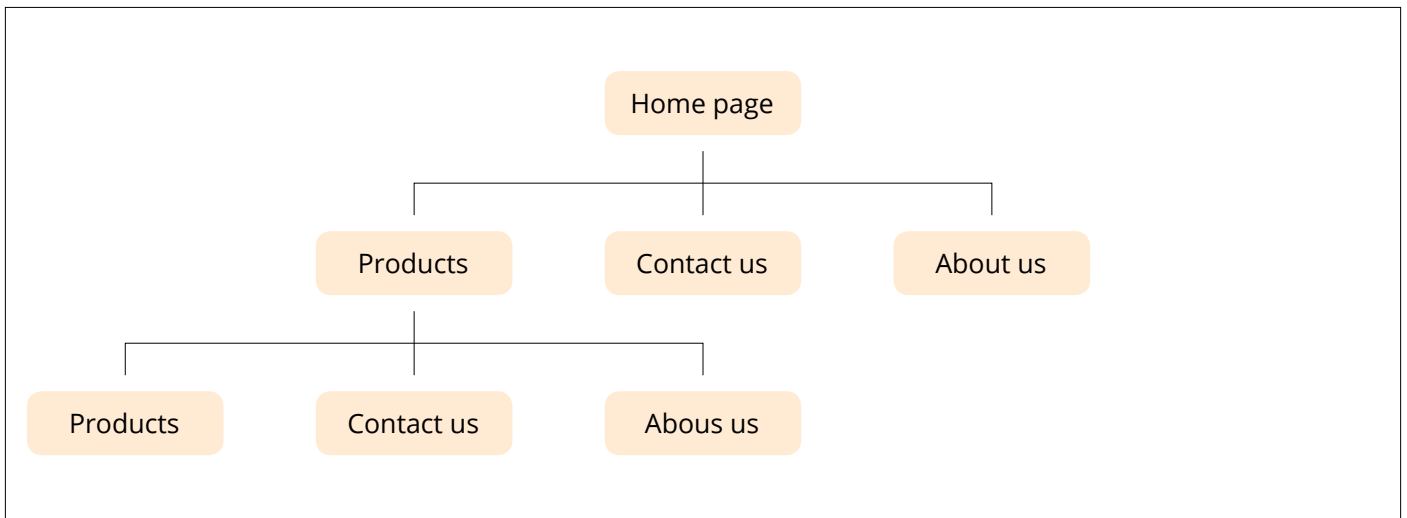
Shared or dedicated hosting?

If you want to start small and build your site or you have limited experience with managing a web hosting account choose shared hosting. Most shared hosting packages will have more than enough space and traffic allowance to get you going with the added benefit of everything on the server being set up and ready for you (software, databases, email etc). All you have to do is upload your site's files and fill the databases with data. If shared hosting is a rowing boat, dedicated servers can be considered the battleship of hosting. Technically, way beyond shared hosting, dedicated servers are the preserve of large and/ or data intensive sites whose owners have an advanced knowledge of the technical/ back end aspects of running a site. If you choose a hosting package today, that shouldn't mean you are stuck with it unless you cancel. Your web host should offer a clear no-fuss upgrade path. You will be amazed at how many don't so if you have ambitions of growth ask about this before you commit to them.

Draw a site map

One of the most frustrating experiences is to hand code your navigation menu and copy that across the entire site only to find you need to add another page and link. After updating all the menus you find yet another page is required and you have to go back through it all again (and again...).

A little bit of planning up front will become a major time save further down the line so before you dive in to coding your site sit down with a pen and a paper and draw out how each page links to the others.



Wire framing

Once you have done this the next step is to 'wire frame' your pages. Here you forgo any thoughts about the design (colour, icons, font formatting etc.) and piece together the basic layout and purpose of each page. Following this process may seem a bit boring and tedious but because you have already visualised how the page elements sit together you can prevent any unnecessary (and painful) changes further down the line where you hit a brick wall and have to come back to start again.

