Why firms make

It's easy to build a website. It's even easy to build a website for, with or at a professional services firm. However, as **Kent Valentine** explains, what's not easy, is to build a 'good' website for, with or at a professional services firm.

Everyone starts the project of a new website with sunny aspirations, but the end result is often a bloated, expensive, bland-looking, behemoth which took 18 months to build, does nothing for the firm and contributed to a handful of mental breakdowns.

This doesn't happen because the firm is incompetent or the agency is crap (although either would make things tough), but because there are four key factors, inherent to partner-led, professional service firms, which make it more difficult for them to produce great digital work.

1 Purpose

Perhaps the biggest issues facing partner-led websites is one of purpose. Just what on earth is it meant to do? Is it an acquisition tool? A retention tool? A service delivery platform? An employee engagement portal? A massive waste of money? All of the above?

The web thrives on specificity. Think of your favourite site (go on, do it). You probably go there to do only one or two things.

The value of specificity: The internet is big and easy enough to move around that you don't really have to put up with a website that does something poorly. If website 'A' does things 'X' & 'Y', but it doesn't do them very well, then you either find another site where you can do both 'X' & 'Y' or, more likely, you find specialist sites for both.

These sites have purpose and they pursue that purpose with bloody, single mindedness because they know that's what they have to do to stand out from the competition.

Centres of gravity and the buy button: This is easier for eCommerce

> *People tend to imagine that a website is like a castle (big, permanent, resistant to change), whereas they're more like a garden (seasonal, flexible and in need of constant attention).*

sites because they have a natural centre of gravity around the 'buy' button.

Non-eCommerce sites have a tougher time of it. Without the buy button centre of gravity, they have to set their own focus, make it clear to their users and then give it the same level of commitment as they would if clicking it made the P&L go wild.

Professional service firms seem to have the worst of this since they give the website so many different roles, functions and tasks to perform that the user is completely overwhelmed.

Think about your own site for a second? How wide is its remit? How many masters does it have to serve? If I went to your homepage right now, would I know what you want me to do before I leave?

In the end, this objective overload has

almost exactly the same effect on the user as having no centre of gravity.

There is an easy remedy to find your buy button, and it's to simply ask "What is the 'buy' button on this page?"

It doesn't have to be a button of course, but on EVERY page there should be something that a user can DO with the information you've given them. It should be something which is valuable to both them and the firm, and it should be as prominent, clear and inviting as an actual 'buy' button.

If there are pages on your website that don't have a centre of gravity, either get them one NOW because they're not working hard enough for you, or else get them off the site because they're never going to contribute and makes it harder for the rest of the site.

This lack of purpose isn't just an issue for the viewer, it's also a problem for the firm in terms of both management and budget since this lazy content takes up both time and money.

Why you need focus: If you don't have a clear remit for the site then how do you decide what content or functionality is right or wrong?

How do you decide between two partners asking for content in the same slot on the homepage?

And perhaps most importantly, how much can or should you spend on it all?

If you REALLY need the site to satisfy 20 different purposes for example, then I hope you're prepared to spend the money required to build what you're asking for (not just one site, but an ecosystem of 10-15 of them). If you don't have that kind of budget, then it's time to get out the red pens and cross out some objectives.

You don't need to give everyone equal time on the pitch.

Your website is not an under-6 foot-

bad websites

ball match. It's not a democracy – it's a business tool.

Put your superstars up front, back them up with support and get everything else out of the way.

This means taking all your site purposes, objectives and priorities and ranking them in descending order of importance. No ties. No equals. No lumping ideas together.

This will give you both a starting point and a way of resolving 'who wins?' situations where two items serving different objectives are competing for the same space.

2 Politics

Of all the sectors we've worked in, none are as politically charged as professional services, probably due to the fact that they're full of partners.

But you can get these intelligent, argumentative and details-oriented

specialists on-side if you show the clear purpose of the site.

Transparency: The first thing is to bring some transparency to the process.

This is one of the key reasons stakeholders can be seen to 'meddle' in projects and then scupper them at the last minute. They can't see and don't understand what's going on, so whenever they get a chance to input, review or approve something, they'll make changes purely to give themselves a sense of control.

Explain how decisions will be made: Partners are generally pretty smart people; if you show them the framework you use to take decisions about your projects, it will go a long way towards building trust and bridging the fee/cost divide.

Understanding the how and why of an unknown mechanism goes a long way to

lifting the shroud of apprehension.

The best way to do this is to have a workshop in a single setting where your project or steering group can collaborate and agree on a way of joining up all of the strategic objectives (what the thing is meant to do) with the individual tactical concerns (how it will do it).

Having an open and shared decision making framework will also allow you to sense check stakeholder 'suggestions' in an objective and transparent fashion.

Even with a perfect framework, it's not viable to involve 400 partners on a regular basis. Having the right number of stakeholders is essential if you want to maintain any kind of project momentum.

Do your best to get a group small enough to sit around a single table and have clear guidelines for what can and can't be decided without all the people present.

Find a champion: While it's not necessary for everyone to have intimate knowledge of all aspects of the project, you will need at least one partner who can be a project champion, and who can help to keep non-stakeholder partners out of the process as much as possible. This champion should understand and be an advocate for the framework agreed in the workshop by the project team.

Any feedback/suggestions/concerns that come back to the project team from the champion should therefore be taken seriously as they will have the best picture of the project from both sides of the fence.

3 Money

Ok, so the challenge firms face with money stems partly from the fact that people can easily misconstrue a website build as a one-off cost.

People outside of the website biz tend

to imagine that a website is like a castle (big, permanent, resistant to change), whereas the truth of the matter is that they're more like a garden (seasonal, flexible and in need of constant attention).

While this might seem like a trifle on the surface, it's actually a HUGE deal. The biggest challenge that websites face is that their value can be quickly eroded by the fluid world in which they exist. In their natural environment therefore, they are fragile and impermanent.

CAP-EX vs OP-EX: This leads to firms provisioning a large spend for a website, but next to nothing for maintenance or optimisation over its intended lifespan. From a financial perspective, this looks like a big, chunky capital expenditure (CAP-EX) spend up front with no supporting operational expenditure (OP-EX) budget.

If you were to graph the spend over time, it generally looks like the last heartbeat of a flatlining patient – one blip and then nothing.

Tending the garden: If you knew that what you were building was fragile, flexible and a little needy when you commissioned it, you might provision your budget differently.

Instead of the big spend up front, you might opt for a smaller initial spend, and an ongoing maintenance budget to sustain it over time. If you don't blow all your budget on the build, then just think about all the cool tactical activities, features and content you could commission afterwards.

Budgeting for reality: Provisioning your budget in this fashion not only means that you can afford to spend money on the things you want to build, but also the things you need to build, post-launch.

The web is a notoriously fickle space, subject to a rate of change not seen anywhere else on earth. Technology, standards, devices, consumer behaviour and trends are constantly shifting in a way that can immediately start to erode the value of your digital assets. Any one of these factors can strip your site of meaningful performance, but two or more acting in concert can be disastrous if left unchecked.

When you're planning to have anything online for a period of time, it's worth acknowledging that you may have to paddle pretty hard to just stay still. If don't leave budget for oars you'll find

yourself sliding backwards – the value of your site being corroded by change.

Future proof is an attitude, not a feature: Whenever we see RFI documents from professional service firms, we joke about how many pages it will be before we get to the section on 'future proofing'. Apart from not building in already-redundant technologies, there is no way to add the feature 'future proof' to a site, there is just emergency response.

You future proof a website by being willing to update it as the environment shifts around it and by accepting the inevitability of change.

4 Behaviour

While this is the last topic covered, it's probably the first one to address if you want to initiate change. This is because all of the issues and challenges mentioned above are largely a product of behaviour.

Pace: The first behaviour which needs to change is pace. While other aspects of a firm might be permitted to be a little slower, there is no way the marketing/BD/digital functions can afford to be tardy, given the speed at which their environment moves.

Teams need to be able to mobilise faster, create faster and (most crucially) decide faster than they have in the past.

It almost doesn't matter if what you decide is wrong, as long as you can quickly pivot and choose a better option when you realise.

Stay small: If an entire ecosystem needs an overhaul, then it's going to be a long project; but there's no way that this elephant is going to be eaten in one mouthful, so break it down into discrete areas that can be stood up quickly and iterated to suit requirements.

Instead of spending 12-18 months on an entirely new ecosystem, try standing-up a beta version of your new site in a few weeks, making it as lean as possible.

While it will seem like every facet of the site is a MUST INCLUDE, this is a guaranteed place where the 80/20 rule will hold sway.

First, identify which 20% of your site is driving 80% of the value and then start from there.

Beta-tastic: The beta should not just be leaner than the incumbent, it should also test a hypothesis. It should help to challenge or confirm a theory that you have

about the new site's structure, design, content or functionality, which you are keen to explore, but aren't ready to commit to wholeheartedly without the data.

Methodology: There is more than one way to build and manage your digital assets, and just like religion, each of these methodologies will have its supporters, detractors and zealots.

Irrespective of whether you follow a waterfall path, or take a more agile approach, it's important to remember that these methodologies are only tools to get the job done.

The reality is that a hybrid approach will often work best since there are very few situations where a single methodology will suit the holy trinity of:

firm → agency → project

Your project is going to be deeply troubled if you have zealots who can't be flexible with how things can be done.

Failure: Sometimes you're going to fail. In fact, failure is pretty much inevitable if you want to change something for the better.

And that's ok, for two reasons:
• You're probably failing now anyway,
• It's temporary.

All of the issues that we've covered in this piece represent the status quo at almost every firm with which we've worked. They are permanently entrenched in these issues and will continue to be so until teams pull together to lift them out.

The work to recognise the challenges for what they are, and to make progress towards resolving them, consists of bold steps forward. Of course there will be missteps, but it's easier to recover from missteps than it is to correct deeply entrenched corporate behaviour and practices.

By starting with behaviour, and then working back through how you approach money, politics and finally the purpose of your website, you will have taken the bold steps that help not only conquer these challenges, but bring lasting, positive change which will be felt far beyond the marketing or BD teams.

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