

How To Assess Your Website

Written by and Copyright Paul Edwards 2010 www.pauledwards.biz info@pauledwards.biz

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Document Purpose

One of the basic elements of understanding what the right solution is for your website is to understand what elements of your existing website work well or have room for improvement.

Essentially this guide helps you understand "Where You Are" in order that you can form some plan of "Where You Want To Go".

The first page of this document will discuss the basics of analysis and the remainder of the document consists of a template. You may be happy to conduct this analysis yourself or you may wish to employ a contractor to do it for you. You may certainly find that some elements of this analysis may or may not be applicable to your site. Don't hesitate to chop it about to suit your needs!

A. BASICS

1. Does the site have a distinct and easily recognisable purpose?

Consider whether the site visibly communicates its purpose. Do visitors know that they have arrived in the "right place".

It is important for you to ask yourselves the following questions:

Why does the site exist?

What real value is added by the site?

How does the site help you further your mission and objectives?

2. Is that purpose reinforced throughout the site?

Explore the site and consider if there is continuity throughout the site. Are some portions of the site adding value, are others not adding value?

3. Does the site prominently feature the company's unique value position on the home page and primary entry pages?

Every company or organisation has a unique value position (UVP) Is the UVP mentioned in the site?

Is vocabulary used positive, does it underpin the UVP? Along with visual style the tone and vocabulary used are all the viewer has to base opinion upon. Is the copy on the site written with the target audience in mind?

The UVP of www.pauledwards.biz is for example "Simply, sorting your website".

4. Is it extremely obvious as to why the viewer should read the site or interact with you at all?

Is the benefits of the site communicated quickly to the visitor? Is there simple, obvious navigation? Are there any offers of information or media which could convince a visitor to dig deeper into the site and perhaps bookmark the site as a useful resource?

B. FINDING THE SITE

1. Is the URL logical i.e. (companyname.com)

Does the site use a logical URL. A URL (Uniform Resource Locator) is geeky way of saying web address.

My name is Paul Edwards. My site's URL is www.paulewards.biz. The URL is logical and easily found and remembered. However, if the URL was www.ficticiousinternet.co.uk/username/paulewards/index.html the URL would not be logical and the difficulties I think speak for themselves.

Owning a top level domain will help in search engine placement, and carries more kudos. If your company uses free web hosting via an internet provider you risk looking unprofessional. I strongly advise purchasing a dedicated URL.

2. Does the site also have a "thing.com"

It is common practice for a company who specialised in a particular product or industry to have more than one domain name. The purpose of this is to catch people who (as mentioned in question 1, above) may just randomly type in URL's into their browser in the hope it will take them where they want to go.

For example your company may wish to have a URL for each of its products or services. These URL's could simply redirect people to the relevant part of your main website. You will however be catching viewers that would previously not be directed your way

3. Does the URL contain dashes and underscores?

Dashes and underscores simply make your URL harder to remember and increases the chance of input errors meaning visitors may end up not finding you or ending up at the wrong site.

4. Have other relevant URL's been reserved?

Has your company purchased URLs which may compete for your traffic ie. Similar names, or names of your products or services.

You could go on to purchase and use (or simply mothball) further domain names. This could be done to allow you to use them, or it could be undertaken to prevent other people using them.

5. Has the site (and its primary entry pages) been submitted to the open source directory?

The Open Directory is the largest human edited directory of websites in the world. This is a basic step that can give much better search engine placement as many search engines use registration with this directory as a factor for producing listings of websites. Admission is free and requires a simple form to be submitted for each page you wish to submit.

I recommend that all entry pages are submitted to the Open Directory. I can undertake this on your behalf.

6. Does the base URL or other primary entry pages require Flash or other viewers?

If a viewer does not have the right plug in or viewer for that page then that content will not display in their browser. Also by dictating that a viewer has to download a particular piece of software to view a page simply creates yet another barrier to entry for the viewer or means that the page may not be displayed correctly.

7. Does the site use frames? This can inhibit placing in search engines as robots cannot easily crawl the site.

Attention should be given to how spiders and robots read a page that is created in tables or frames. Tables and frames affect the direction that spiders and robots read the page in, and as such whoever writes copy for the site should bear this in mind to ensure optimised Meta tag data placement.

I recommend that if your site is constructed in using tables or frames that it is redesigned using HTML for the content, and CSS for the styling and structure of the site.

8. Is the site easy to find if you do not already have the URL?

Use keywords which your customers may think of. Manually input of these search terms into the top search engines and study the results.

You may wish to use the following search engines.

- Yahoo
- Google
- Jeeves (ASK)
- Lycos
- AltaVista
- Excite
- Bing
- AOL
- Netscape Search

Where does your company site appear in the search results?

Poor search engine placement will heavily reduce the potential exposure of your site. Common causes of this are poor search engine optimisation, infrequent updates, poor meta data, lack of content and poor structure.

9. Are several links to the site provided by most of the major search engines?

Google and other tools available allow you to search for links to your website. Count how many unique links there are. Not only is this an indication of how useful your site is to others, but this figure contributes to how your site is ranked by search engines.

10. Titles. Do the page titles contain keywords that are important?

Is every page title identical? Incorrectly edited page titles inhibit robots and spiders from effectively indexing the pages.

When any changes are made to your website it is very important that each page title includes words and/or phrases that reflect the content of the page. Pages which share words between content and title will be indexed higher in results. A text based site map should also be implemented to further allow spiders and robots to index pages.

Look at your competitors websites are page titles useful and contain keywords and phrases relative to the site?

11. Search Phrases. Do the site and its titles/page names contain search phrases?

See above.

12. Are keywords up high on the page and in larger fonts?

Important words and phrases must be at the top of the page, in the title and in a bigger font to be search engine/visually friendly and easy to navigate. A great principal is “good things float to the top”. Are important keywords used in Heading tags?

13. Does the site include a site map page? Site maps with text links allow easy navigation of the page to spiders and robots.

Self explanatory.

14. Does your site recognise the existence of major competitors for specific keywords? Where keywords are sought after does the site mention others that will place high on listings for those keywords?

If a competitor for example scores high in search engines, then by linking to them and mentioning them in copy, your site will rise in listings by association with a popular site and the relevance of the keywords used.

15. Does the site use text links.

Yes. This is advantageous as they can be read by screen readers. Where images are used for links, are the links duplicated elsewhere on the page (such as in the footer). This is important for search engine rankings.

16. Does the site look like it was designed for the search engines? I.e. Simple, well structured, tidy code etc.

Have a look at the code, the layout of the site. Is it easy to follow?

17. Paid placement. Is this utilised?

I advise using a simple service such as Google ad words at least initially. It can take several months for search engines to re index a page/site so the initial boost in traffic will be welcome until people are more able to find the site by using related keywords in searches.

Any changes you make to your site will take a while to become known so don't be too critical of your progress for the first few months. After that period then more detailed assessment of statistics is more reliable and “real”.

I recommend that you contact all your partners, Joint ventures, academic colleagues and ask them to link directly to your site. The more sites that link to you, the higher your search engine rankings

18. Does the site look like it is built for the people viewing it?

Pretend you are one of your customers. Is your site designed for you?

19. Has the site been submitted to search engines instead of relying upon spiders indexing the site?

Search engine submission should be done with frequency, however search engines should not be spammed with applications every month or they could blacklist your site and remove it from listings.

20. Do many other sites link to you?

Use google or other tools to work this out.

21. Are pages easy to link to? Are the pages static or dynamically created?

Are pages static or are they dynamically created?

22. Are the sites linking to yours significant in the industry or are they junk sites.

Self explanatory.

23. Does each page link back to the front page etc. Do internal sites link to each other? Is there reciprocal linking?

Self explanatory.

24. Is the URL publicised? I.e. business cards, letterheads, literature, articles etc. Newsletters, printed work, adverts, newspaper ads, job adverts, radio, written technical articles and publications, press releases.

Self explanatory.

C. CONTENT**1. Is content:**

useful
helpful
interesting
captivating
for the target audience.

It is important to view the site and think like one of your clients. Put yourself in their shoes and mark the performance. This will clearly show you how you need to progress.

2. Does the site have a substantial amount of significant, interesting text and visual content for target audience?

Self explanatory

3. Is content frequently updated, are old items archived.

Self explanatory

4. Can relevant recent articles in current trade magazines and technical publications be accessed from the site?

Self explanatory.

5. Are documents that might be printed off available with a print button, is the format easy to print.

Whereas regular content is ok to be printed, for document protection I advise making documents available in PDF.

6. Are lengthy articles, brochures, specifications and technical articles available in Adobe Acrobat PDF format?

For ease of viewing and document integrity it is advisable to make all documents available in PDF.

D. FIREWALLS, VIRUS CHECKERS & AD BLOCKERS**1. Does the site display properly when firewalls and other security measures are set to maximum levels. Does it display at all?**

Check in all commonly used browsers..

2. Does the site use banners to display text messages that can be blocked by ad blockers? Many sites use images to link to pages. These can be blocked by some ad blockers.

Images should have alternative text links to convey to screen readers and those that view web pages as text only what information should have been displayed.

E. NAVIGATION**1. Does the site have a consistent feel and appearance or does it feel piecemeal constructed?**

Is there continuity throughout the site, or does it appear to have been added to in an adhoc fashion?

2. Easily Navigated.

Is the navigation obvious, is it clearly labelled and do you know where you are in the site at all times.

3. Is the use of scrolling minimized?

Scrolling is not a bad thing as such, but if it can be minimised it makes use of the page much easier. Ensure that important information is nearer the top of the page.

4. Are navigation methods consistent and in similar locations.

Is navigation consistent in location and method on all the pages?. Lack of consistency could be confusing for the user.

5. Are symbols, icons, photos or graphics used for navigation obvious in terms of what they represent?

Is it easy for the visitor to work things out. If visitors have to work hard to use the site they will likely not bother.

6. Does the home page establish the basic navigation methods?

Does your site need any explanation to new visitors?

7. Are places viewers supposed to click obvious?

Links should be obvious to the viewer.

8. Is the colour code on the links and previous followed links intuitive? Are they easy to see against the background colour and images?

Self explanatory

9. Does the site let you leave?

Some sites drive me insane when they wont let you press the back button or navigate away from the page. Why risk alienating visitors? They may not come back.

10. When you click on the back button are you redirected to another site instead of being allowed to back out?

Self explanatory.

11. Is a home icon button or link present in the same position on every page in the site?

Self explanatory.

12. Does the site personally recognise you when you come back to the site?

Self explanatory.

13. Is the site customizable by individual viewers?

Self explanatory.

14. If user id's, passwords, PIN numbers or similar input is required to access to certain portions of the site is this convenient.

Self explanatory.

F. GENERAL

1. Would HC be considered visually appealing by its target audience?

Self explanatory.

2. Are the background colours dithered, did they use browser safe colours that register correctly on 256 colour displays?

Self explanatory.

3. Is the site internally/locally managed or is it operated by and advertising agency or internet provider? Locally managed sites can interact with viewers more effectively.

Self explanatory.

4. Width and length – does it require extensive vertical scrolling.

Self explanatory.

5. Updated regularly.

A site that is infrequently updated can give the impression that the organisation is under resourced, is not active, or may not be what it claims.

It is arguable that if you are not able to update a site regularly then you should consider:

- Using an external media agency to handle your site and updates
- Training an internal member of staff and have them responsible for the site
- Recruiting a web savvy member of staff
- Looking to internal support services such as press officers/marketing for support with news items etc
- Consider the possibility of not maintaining a website.

6. Is the content easily readable by the target audience?

Self explanatory.

7. Is a “what’s new” type section provided?

Self explanatory.

8. Is an email service announcing recent major updates available?

Email is a great way to keep people informed of changes, although now twitter, facebook and other social networking sites provide just as good if not a less intrusive way of providing information to clients.

9. Attention to details, spelling errors, broken graphics, broken links?

Self explanatory.

10. Do they write to their audience? Talk over them? Down to them?

Self explanatory.

11. Does the site look nice?

Self explanatory.

12. Size of site, small medium large?

Self explanatory.

13. Does the site supply significant content or just a brochure with links?

Self explanatory.

15. Is the site viewable with all common browsers? Chrome, Firefox, Netscape, Internet Explorer?

Self explanatory.

14. Available in more than one language?

Self explanatory.

15. Does it generally resemble other sites in the same industry?

Self explanatory.

16. Loads fast?

Self explanatory, however, think from the perspective of your target audience. Do they have broadband or do they have older technology?

17. Easy to print information from?

Does the site have a print button or a link to a printer friendly version?

18. How do they try to build site traffic

Self explanatory.

19. CSS

Does the site use Cascading Style Sheets (CSS). CSS allows whoever edits the site to make sweeping changes throughout the site with ease. This increases editing efficiency.

20. Does the site leave you wanting to come back again?

Self explanatory.

21. Have the amount of resources devoted to developing and maintaining the site obviously changed?

Self explanatory.

G. BRANDING

1. Besides having a consistent feel throughout the site, is that feel and image consistent with the image and feel presented through other media and the products of the company involved.

Self explanatory.

2. Does each page bear the corporate logo?

Self explanatory.

3. Are the colours consistent with other corporate images?

Self explanatory.

H. PRIMARY SECTIONS OF THE SITE

1. Service tools i.e. FAQ's, manuals, email etc

Self explanatory.

2. Links to other sites.

Self explanatory.

3. Job openings available?

Self explanatory.

4. Helpful tools.

Self explanatory.

5. Is the site part of an associate program?

Self explanatory.

6. Are there other sections that could be included in the site to benefit its viewers and purpose?

Self explanatory.

I. E COMMERCE

Self explanatory.

J. TEST RESPONSE TIMES

1. How long did it take to get a response from the person who maintains the site?

Self explanatory.

K. TECHNICAL OPERATION

1. Method used to create the site.

Self explanatory.

2. In house operation or done by firm?

Self explanatory.

3. Easy to find in search engines?

Self explanatory.

4. Metatags. Good use of labels? Within length limits? Keywords used to frequently? Appropriate keywords for each page? Metatags contain a limited number of prim words, not dozens? Proper use of keywords including incorrect spellings/typos? List competitors and their product names in keywords metatag , possible trademark violation issues?

Does your site place highly in search engines? If not then it may be poorly optimised for search engines. Search engines rank sites according to a number of things such as page load time, key word relevance, metatags etc.

5. Traffic levels

Look at visitor statistics and determine how useful your site is to visitors.

6. Who hosts the site?

Is the site hosted internally or externally? Is it a reputable firm with minimal down time?

7. Can you detect the presence of logs? Are they being used to better the site?

Does the site record visitor statistics to assist you in analysis?

8. Are browser types and versions checked for, to insure everyone can view the material?

Does the site present a page tailored to the browser you are using. If not then the site may appear differently to viewers depending upon the browser they are using. This may not be a problem to you but is worthy of consideration.

9. Chat boards, forums?

Does the site use forums, chat boards etc. If so are these moderated? Sadly there are many people who hack and exploit chat rooms and forums to post spam messages. Although this is possible to circumvent, it can be time consuming to resource.

10. Frames?

If the site is made using frames then this may adversely affect both search engine ranking and the ability for screen readers to make proper sense of the page.

11. Accesses databases.

Does the site generate pages on the fly from information in databases? This may make the site difficult to place in search engines.

12. E commerce site.

Self explanatory.

13. Secure site for inputting data.

If the site requires information for payments or any personal information, is it a secure site? Does it have a security certificate?

14. Languages used.

This refers to html, css, xhtml etc. rather than English, Japanese etc. Are the languages used to build the site, current and well supported?

15. Plug ins.

Self explanatory.

16. Provides machine readable text for the visually handicapped?

Self explanatory.

17. Do they have off site backups?

Self explanatory.

18. Real time backup systems capable of instantly taking over?

Self explanatory.

19. Graphics minimised for fast loading by minimizing number of colours

Self explanatory.

20. Graphics use internet safe colours?

Self explanatory.

21. Provides forms requiring access information from visitors.

Self explanatory.

22. Guestbook?

Self explanatory.

23. Subscription process?

Self explanatory.

24. Does the site use cookies.

Self explanatory. Does the site require the use of cookies?

25. Does the visitor experience a tailored service based on their previous visit?

Self explanatory. For example if you registered with a site, does it welcome you back personally?

L. COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE OPPORTUNITIES**1. View a competitor's site. Do they offer what you do not?**

A great tool is to look at your competitors sites. What do they offer their visitors? Do your competitors sites suggest features that your site may or may not need. Conversely, do you have a large number of unwanted features which your competitors do not?

2. Is company history given?

Self explanatory.

3. Number of employees?

Self explanatory.

4. Photos, biographies of major executives provided.

Self explanatory.

5. Can you learn something from the URL registration on WHOIS?

If you conduct a search on <http://www.whois.net/> for your website, is any information presented?

6. Do they sponsor any community activities or causes?

Self explanatory.

7. Do they sponsor any sporting events, sports teams, race cars or things of that nature?

Self explanatory.

8. Press releases?

Self explanatory.

9. Investor relations area?

Self explanatory.

10. Upcoming shows or educational visits?

Self explanatory.

M. REVIEW HISTORICAL CACHES OF THE SITE

Are historical caches available? If your site isn't well known or more importantly, not well constructed or optimised for search engines, they may not be.

APPENDIX

Use this section to attach any supporting statistics, documents, log prints or anything else which you think will support your site analysis.

Need Further Assistance?

I hope this rough guide has been of use in helping you form your own method of analysing a site. At the very least I am sure you will have been introduced to thinking about aspects of a website which you haven't before.

Should you like a full analysis conducted of your site, or you would like to discuss your findings in more depth please don't hesitate to give me a call for a no obligation chat.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Paul Edwards

www.pauledwards.biz

info@pauledwards.biz

Further contact details are available via the website.