

Website Planning Guide

These are the planning lessons that consistently emerged while building and improving websites for small businesses.

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The most successful website projects begin with understanding the business. This guide helps you prepare before design and development begin. The focus is preparation, clarity, and decision-making.

Many website challenges start before development does, because the business has not yet defined:

- Its services
- Its audience
- Its goals
- Its priorities

A website should support the business, not define it.

By the end of this guide, you should know what information and decisions need to be in place before a website project starts. Print this page or download the PDF to work through it.

1. Define What The Business Does First

OBSERVED ISSUE

Projects often become difficult when service offerings are not fully defined.

We have spent significant time helping businesses clarify:

- Service categories
- Primary offerings
- Future offerings
- Customer-facing language

before pages could even be structured.

LESSON

A website project becomes much easier when the business can clearly answer:

- What do we do?
- Who do we help?
- What makes us different?

2. Build Around Today's Business

OBSERVED ISSUE

Multiple projects involved discussion of:

- Future services
- Future features
- Future business models

before the current business was fully represented online.

Examples we have encountered:

- Rentals planned for the future
- Tours planned for the future
- Additional service offerings under consideration

LESSON

Launch the website around the services actively being offered today.

Leave room for future growth without letting future plans delay launch.

3. Gather Content Early

OBSERVED ISSUE

Website projects frequently slow down when core content has not been prepared.

Examples include:

- Service descriptions
- About information
- Photos
- Branding assets, such as your logo and brand colors
- Contact information

The website cannot effectively communicate the business if the business information itself is not yet organized.

LESSON

Gather content before design begins whenever possible.

4. Clarify Your Audience

OBSERVED ISSUE

Many businesses initially describe what they do before defining who they serve.

Website messaging becomes stronger when the audience is clearly understood.

Examples:

- Local consumers
- Boat owners
- Vehicle owners
- Small businesses

The language and site structure often change once the intended audience becomes clear.

LESSON

Know who the website is intended to help before writing content.

5. Plan Website Ownership

OBSERVED ISSUE

Website projects often involve multiple systems:

- Domain registrar, where the domain name is registered
- Hosting provider, the company that stores the website
- Website platform, the software the website is built on
- Email provider
- Analytics accounts, the tools that show how many people visit the site

Ownership can become unclear over time.

LESSON

Document these before launch:

- ☐ Website administrator
- ☐ Hosting access
- ☐ Domain ownership
- ☐ Platform ownership

6. Think About Search Visibility Early

OBSERVED ISSUE

We have repeatedly discussed:

- Google Business Profile, your business listing on Google
- Indexing, getting your pages included in Google search results
- Sitemaps, a list of your pages for search engines
- Search Console, Google's free tool that shows how your site appears in search
- SEO titles, the page titles shown in search results
- Page structure, how your pages are organized

after websites were already nearing completion.

LESSON

Search visibility should be considered during planning, not only after launch.

7. Simplicity Usually Wins

OBSERVED ISSUE

Many website discussions eventually resulted in simplifying:

- Navigation, the menus and links
- Service organization
- Messaging
- Branding language

The clearest websites were often the easiest for customers to understand.

LESSON

If a visitor can quickly understand:

- Who you are
- What you do
- How to contact you

the website is already accomplishing its primary purpose.