

Why Web Projects Go Wrong

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It's one of those business nightmares that can be avoided: You've hired a Web developer whose work looks good. You've got the cash flow to cover the budget. You've already told customers to be on the lookout for your new Web site. Then weeks pass, the site doesn't look like you thought it would, and the developer says he's already over budget and will need your agreement on a revised fee in order to continue.

What the heck happened?

Nowadays, there's no great mystery to creating a Web site or e-mail newsletter, whether it's simple or complex. Years into the Web's evolution, a range of tools are available to help novices and experts alike navigate the tasks involved in designing, building and maintaining their product. Still, projects go off track more often than most people in the business would care to admit. Sometimes technical snafus, or unforeseen events from blizzards to hurricanes, cause delays. But often projects run into problems for reasons that are simply human, and which can be avoided through careful planning and attentive management.

Thinking Things Through

Greg Baber, chief technology officer for the Index Pricing Group, a financial information company based in Newtown, Pa., is a veteran of interactive projects on both large and small scales. In his experience, the single leading cause of problems is inadequate planning. Regardless of your project's size, "it's critical to make sure the site's business requirements are adequately and accurately defined," says Baber. "The developer has to have enough information to build the right thing. If the business side of the team isn't defining its needs clearly enough, or the technical side isn't getting all of information it needs, you'll run into problems. It's important to sit down and know what you want to do."

Defining your requirements in advance can help you or your developer scope out the work involved in the product's actual development. "In order to keep 'on-track,' you need to know what track your project is supposed to take," says Dana Hutchins, president of Inforest Communications, a Web developer and consultant in Trenton, N.J. "A documented process serves as a map for this." Hutchins believes projects get into trouble when developers have an "underdeveloped process and/or lack of project management resources." He adds, "There needs to be some management mechanism in place to take your project from beginning to end, as well as a means for both the client and developer to bring resources together to realize the goals of the project." Put another way, each project needs a champion who's going to make sure it gets done. When more than one company is involved - as would be the case when you're working with a consultant - both your company and the consultant's should have someone responsible for keeping the project moving.

Still, the bottom line is this: Know as much as possible about what you want before you start to build. "The key to preventing problems is planning, planning and more planning," says Kathy Doyle, a marketing and interactive consultant in Mendham, N.J. "Make sure everyone involved understands the mission at hand and stays focused."

Scope Creep

Planning carefully can also help you avoid another common problem, which Doyle calls scope creep. "This is when the team continually allows the project to grow in scope, thereby missing deadlines, adding more work and cost, and basically losing focus," she says. Scope creep is particularly insidious because it happens so slowly. Says Doyle: "You don't even realize it's happening."

Doyle believes a project's scope becomes malleable in part because its team attempts to create features and products that don't meet the needs of the target audience. "Most people build based on what they know, but they don't take time to test their theories or fully immerse themselves in upfront research," she says. So, not only do you need a comprehensive development plan before you begin, you need an educated plan.

The Index Pricing Group's Baber looks on scope creep in a slightly different way. He sees teams get overwhelmed when they attempt to bite off more than they can chew. "It's dangerous to try and do a big project with everything in it, rather than take baby steps," he says. "People should try to organize their features into phases - phase one, phase two, that sort of thing."

Whether you're dealing with scope creep or the mother of all Internet projects, Doyle, Baber, and other professionals agree a key to navigating these particular shoal waters is a strong project manager. "So many projects fail because they don't have solid project management to make sure everything stays focused and everything is tested," says Doyle.

Content

Of course, snafus can occur in areas besides design and development. "Developers and clients underestimate the amount of time and attention necessary to plan, gather and develop content for a Web project, particularly written copy," says Dana Hutchins. "It's a good idea to start assembling information, artwork and other marketing materials early on - even when you're first considering the venture." In addition, Hutchins says, be ready to devote real time to creating the project's content, even if it's only to be interviewed so a writer can create any copy necessary for its completion. Schedule time to review and approve all copy, as well. "The responsiveness of all parties is very important," Hutchins says.

Part of preparing the content is ensuring your message is correct and effective, Doyle believes. She suggests running the message and copy past several customers or colleagues to see if it generates the type of reaction you intend. "Get another set of eyes," she says. "People always think research has to be a big thing, but it doesn't." If you hate the thought of "bothering" a client, Doyle suggests not worrying. "People love to be asked for their input," she believes.

Relationships

Unless you're building it with your own hands, and without any input from anyone, creating a Web site is a team effort. "You may be building a site of three or four pages or a database-driven product with several hundred pages. Discussions on both of those start with, 'Hi, I want a Web site,'" observes Baber. Thus, making sure that everyone involved is clear on their role, their responsibilities and their rewards is a key factor to success.

"If you're hiring outside resources, make sure you understand what you're getting," Doyle advises. Make sure you're comfortable, too. Before signing a vendor, interview several candidates to make sure the price you're paying is fair, the schedule you're agreeing to is realistic and that, overall, you're going to get what you want.

And be sure to document your agreement, adds Hutchins. "You should have a written agreement outlining the responsibilities and terms of the project," he says. "This protects both the client's and the developer's interests." In addition, Hutchins believes the agreement should define the product - or the "deliverables" - as well as a schedule for completion.

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