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FUNCTIONAL WEBSITE DESIGN FOR MARKETING SUCCESS

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You've put a lot of effort into driving traffic to your website, and it looks terrific. To make sure the investment pays off make sure you give equal attention to assuring a good user experience. Designing for site usability is critical to a website's success as a marketing tool.

Good website design includes good functional design. You want the user to be able to easily find what they are looking for, navigate the site without annoyance and stay on the site long enough to absorb your message. You don't want them getting "lost." Here are some considerations in designing and developing a website for usability:

Keep it simple. A business website should have a clear, straightforward message that is conveyed both by the copy and by the visual elements. Users will give up quickly if they have to tunnel through "too much information." Fewer businesspeople are mixing business and personal websites these days. That's a good thing.

Remember the two-click rule. Ideally, everything on a website should be accessible within two clicks of the home page. The home page menu is the first click.

The second click might be a text hyperlink or a secondary menu on a subpage. If the site is much "deeper" than this, users can get frustrated trying to find information. No rule is hard and fast, but be very careful about bending this one.

Watch pull-down menus. Pull-down menus let a person see everything that's available on the site right from the home page, without cluttering the page. Keep the lists short for ease of use. When pulldowns appear to the side of the original menu, have the developer "freeze" the menu (lock it in place for some seconds once it has appeared) so that people don't lose the menu as they mouse sideways and then down.

Make sure users can find their way back. You may have had the experience of finding yourself on a web page with no way to access the main menu or get back to the home page except the "Back" button. Users won't explore long in this situation. The main menu should be visible even when a user is several levels down in a site. Keeping pages short keeps menus in sight. When scrolling is needed, pro-

vide a quick-link from the bottom to the top of the page, or repeat the main menu at the bottom of the copy.

When a user opens an attachment on your site, or a link to another website, they should be able to return quickly from the side trip. That's why it's best for attachments and other websites to open in a separate window.

Use home page links to drive traffic within the site. When there's something new about your business, of course, you put it on your web site right away – whether it's good press, a "name brand" client, or an exciting new product or service. Drive traffic to what you want the user to see, by linking directly to it from your home page. Make sure the initial site design has an appropriate space for these "headline" links.

Design for maintenance and expansion. Your website should be designed for the way you plan to maintain it. Navigational buttons on the side tend to make it easier to add major new categories. Buttons on top let you add subcategories but require page redesign for new major categories.

If you want to maintain the site in-house, you will either need staffs who knows some HTML, or a user-friendly design package such as Contribute from Macromedia. The individual charged with site maintenance should have a good eye and the discipline to adhere to a style sheet and color scheme. Staff "creativity" can quickly destroy a site's visual integrity and wreak havoc with your branding.

Sweat the details-up front. Develop detailed written functional specifications before coding is done, so you and your designer/developer have a clear understanding. If you want an event calendar, specify its format and how it will be updated. "Make the site searchable," doesn't tell the whole story. Should users be able to search by keyword? product name? city, state, zip? Will there be pull-down menus? These are your decisions.

Website design is NEVER "done." As your business evolves, you need to change your functional design accordingly... Make sure you have a vibrant and functional site that people will enjoy visiting – a website that works.