

# Website Owners Manual

A practical guide to the planning, development and ongoing care of your website.

## Introduction

Welcome to The Flex Studio Website Owners' Manual. This guide has been written to help you navigate the complexities of developing and running your own website.

We get asked a lot of questions when developing websites, and do a lot of talking. But by far the biggest problem we face is not in coming up with the answers, but in communicating them. And it works in reverse too - how do designers and clients tell us what it is they want when the language and technology stand in their way?

This document came along as a means of bridging that communication gap. It serves as a discussion point when planning your project, giving you a way into the sometimes difficult process of finding a simple solution. It also outlines the design and development process, shows you how to compile a bug report, and offers useful advice on topics like search engine performance.

This manual is a working document and we encourage you to use it throughout the life-cycle of your website.

## How to use your manual:

The manual is broken up into three key sections:

- 1.Planning your website
- 2.Building your website
- 3.Running your website

We have also provided a couple of useful appendices.

## Other important Documents

As well as this Website Owner's Manual you will receive a number of documents throughout a website development:

### **Preliminary Proposal**

A short document that outlines our understanding of the project before any detailed planning begins.

### **Development Proposal:**

Based on the Preliminary Proposal and meetings between everyone involved, this is a much more detailed document. .

### **Specification Document:**

This is a detailed summary of every feature and is continually updated as the project develops – particularly useful on large, complex websites.

If needed, we will issue revisions and amendments to the proposal and specification document as the website takes shape.

## Contacts

### **New Business / Design / Work in Progress**

Any sales or new business enquiries should be directed to Geoff Cox. Email [geoff@first4studio.com](mailto:geoff@first4studio.com) for design related queries, or [sales@first4studio.com](mailto:sales@first4studio.com) for any new business enquiries.

### **Technical Issues / Bugs**

Issues and bugs can be logged via our website under the contact section, or emailed to [support@first4studio.com](mailto:support@first4studio.com). You can reach the office by calling 028 958 10500. Visit [www.first4studio.com](http://www.first4studio.com) for full contact details.

## Planning your website project

So you want to build a website. Below are a series of questions we've put together that will help you to clarify just what it is your website will do and how it's going to get built. The answers to these questions will help us to write a clear development proposal - the document that we need before we can get started on making your dream into a reality.

It may be that at this stage you don't yet know all the answers. That's ok, because with our help you will. So sharpen your pencil, grab a fresh cup of coffee and let's get started.

## Why do you need a website?

First up, we start with the obvious, and this is not as stupid a question as it first looks. Many people rush into building a website without a clear idea of what they want, or how it will fit into their business needs.

We've identified four broad reasons for building a website. Think about each of these and how much they apply to your business:

1. The website is your business - such as an online store or an online magazine
2. The website may be a key part of your revenue - such as an online shop that supports an existing retail or manufacturing business.
3. The website may form part of your business framework, such as an association keeping it's membership database online.
4. Lastly, and by far the most common case - the website may be a marketing tool.

For most businesses, it will be a combination of these factors - For example, our own website fits into cases 3 & 4. The purpose of your website will colour every other question in this document, and only you can answer it - so please think carefully.

When thinking about your site, try to focus on core outcomes for your business, such as receiving qualified referrals or a certain volume of sales. We can then come up with customised solutions that match these ideas – after all, we know the technology but only you know your business.

## Your competition

Once you know what you want, it's important to ask whether anyone else is already doing it. By looking closely at what your competition has done you can learn a lot that will save you hassle in the future.

Make a note of the parts of their website that you like, and that you think work well. Note also the features that annoy you, or that you believe impede the message of the site. Write down the URL's (website addresses) of these sites and include them in your notes. Some things to look for:

- What impression does the design of the graphics make on you?
- Is it easy to get around the site?
- Did the features work well when you tried them?
- Does the site excite you and make you want to come back again?

This will provide an excellent guide for us and will show us how we can refine your idea to make it unique. Of course, if you're going to be competing against these sites, you'll want to have an advantage over them, and now is a good time to explore just what that advantage might be. By keeping the good, and then improving on the bad, you'll already be ahead of the game.

## Do you need more than just a web designer?

We often find ourselves as the first port of call for people that want to set up an online business. But we're only part of the team you'll need to be successful.

Often the work we do is part of a larger marketing campaign. In many cases there will be a number of professionals working together on print material, advertising copy and the website content.

We need to know who is making the decisions on the design, who signs off on copy and features, and at the end of the day, who the website is for. We're happy to work directly with your graphic designer or advertising firm as needed, and if you don't have any of these professionals working with you but you feel that you should, we can provide all such services.

At the Flex Studio we provide complete graphic design and programming services as well as a full design and print facility. And there is also the question of the 'site architecture' - this lofty term describes the way in which information on the site is organised, and how it will be accessed by people using the site.

Although we normally provide this service directly, some designers come to us with a plan already prepared - so think about who will be taking responsibility for the site layout. By making our role clear, you will also make the job easier to price, and easier to complete on time.

## Who is your audience?

It's important to establish just who you intend as the audience for your website. Is it for the use of existing customers, or is it a method of growing your customer base? Perhaps it will be a mix of both. Is the website development part of a larger media campaign, which may include other forms of advertising? You should also consider the geographic location of your audience, as your website will generally be accessible from anywhere in the world. How will this affect shipping, monetary units and contact information? Will you need to provide the content of the site in multiple languages?

This question plays a key role in the way the website will be promoted, and therefore, in the amount of traffic it receives. We suggest that for websites with a local audience, traditional marketing techniques are often the most effective way of establishing your audience - and from there you can grow the site through the web. Avoid the trap of being too vague. A lot of people tell us that 'anybody is my audience' - to which we reply that anybody is not everybody. Narrow it down to realistic groups. As with any business venture, knowing who your customers are is half the battle won.

## Do you have an existing site?

If you already have a website, tell us about it. What were both the positive and negative experiences of developing it? Do you have any ongoing problems updating it and keeping it online? Is it expensive to run on a day-to-day basis? Tell us also what you like about it, and what you would change.

Finally, you should consider any customer feedback you've had regarding the site - what impressions or responses have you had?

## Time and Budget

The budget is often a sensitive topic between designers and their clients, usually because the client wants to establish the 'real' cost of a feature before revealing how much they have to spend.

The problem lies in the huge variability between the quality and scope of a possible feature. Our policy is to bring all such questions out in the open for frank discussion. This usually results in a range of alternatives being produced, so that the best solution can be found for the budget available.

When do you expect the project to be finished by? Try to establish a range of dates for each stage of the process and allow plenty of time for full testing of the system before it goes live. Once again, it's about communication and making your needs known to us so that the proper plan can be put in place.

We will create a formal project plan for you as part of the proposal and you are welcome to discuss date changes with us so we both have a realistic view of what the project timeline will be. Whenever there is a change in the project plan that affects this timeline (from either party) we will update it and send it to you.

## Any Requests?

Now it's your turn to ask questions.

Everybody has a wish list of the stuff they'd like. Try writing it down, then discuss it with us point by point. It may be that there are better alternatives, or possibly the cost of some features will prove inhibitive. Whatever the case, get it all down, because even if it's not developed now, you may want to implement it later on. This will allow us to include the possibility of such features when designing the site, which could save you money and time when you eventually come to build them.

Also make a note of:

- The scale of the site as you envisage it.
- The content, such as where it will come from, and who will be responsible for writing it.

- Think about who will be in charge of the project, i.e. who will we be reporting to? It makes our job a lot easier if we can have one point of call with our clients.

## Hosting and Maintenance

Once a website has been built, it has to live somewhere. For those that haven't had their own website before, the service of making your site available to the wider internet and storing the data it contains is called web hosting. If you've paid good money for your website, you shouldn't skimp on this long-term and very important part in its life-cycle.

We decided to invest in hosting the sites we develop with "the best" because we were not satisfied with the security and scope of the services that were available. This has allowed us to provide the very best in security, service and server uptime. It also increases the range of features we can offer.

Whilst there is a lot of cheap server space out there today, we believe web hosting should offer more than just space, but care and accountability too. Our job is to make sure that your website not only works on the first day it goes live, but that it's still working years later. Because of our choice of hosting partners and the use of open technology you can sleep easy knowing that even if we were hit by a bus next week, your investment would be safe.

## The Next Step

All of this planning advice is designed to help you gather information so that we can prepare an accurate proposal for you. This could be a single sheet of A4 with a few scribbled notes, or it could be a large document in the form of a brief. The important thing is to clearly communicate the intent of your site, and your desires for it.

We happily offer a free consultation, and proposal, for any material that you bring to us. Simply call us using the details provided to set up an appointment.

## Building your website

There are a lot of ways to build a website. Some companies sell pre-programmed 'template' or 'package' sites, others focus solely on one kind of website, like creating online brochures. The Flex Studio, on the other hand creates websites that are tailored to each individual client. They're hand-crafted and focused.

We use what is called an 'iterative' approach during design, that is, we make design iterations of a single well-developed idea, rather than developing a number of less thought out ideas and asking you to pick the one closest to what you need.

While your site is being built, the most important document is your website specification. It contains details of what we're building, and when each stage will be complete. It will also be updated whenever required so that it is always an accurate reflection of what is being done. We keep a record of the changes to the specification as we go.

## Your website address

This is often referred to as either your Domain name or your URL. Some clients register this themselves, others ask us to do it on their behalf. The only thing we ask is that you ensure you keep a copy of your registration details safe, but somewhere that you can easily find them again.

We occasionally require changes to the settings of this web address in order to make your website live. We refer to these as the DNS settings, and can only carry out the changes with your permission.

As we host your website we are also able to help with the setting up of your email addresses. Simply let us know the addresses you require and leave the rest to us.

## Design concepts

You'll hear us discussing a number of key design concepts while building your site. Here's a brief rundown. Other terms that we might use are covered in the glossary which is in the Appendices.

### **Usability:**

We like to design systems that are a joy to use, and websites that people love. Of course, making a complex website seem simple is much harder than it first appears.

The first impulse many website owners have is to add more and more features with the idea that they will be giving more value to their audience. However, a website with a simple idea that is well made will always outperform one that is too complex – just look at the success of Google: a phenomenal success and a complex piece of programming, but it presents a very simple face to the world.

### **Accessibility:**

We take it for granted that new buildings should provide access to disabled people. Similarly, websites can also make this provision. By being well built and well structured, they can even be used by the specialised software that allows blind users to surf the internet. Far from being a solely altruistic exercise, there is a positive spin-off to building your website like this – search engine software is itself, for all intents and purposes, blind. It also means that your site will be more easily adapted to work on a range of devices – such as mobile phones and PDA's. So an accessible site is not only good sense socially, it's commercially useful. All of our websites are constructed in an accessible manner, and in line with international standards.

### **Compatibility:**

Around the world, people use a wide variety of computers and software applications to access the internet and view web pages. Our stance is that a website should work well across all modern platforms and programs. To that end we test sites we develop under Windows, Mac OS X and Linux (and a range of browsers.)

### **Communication**

All of the design concepts above are focused on clear communication to the greatest number of people. That's what it's all about – whether your goal is to sell more widgets, publish more articles, or register members to your local chamber of commerce.

Our goal is to ensure that a reasonable degree of backwards compatibility is combined with the best performance on a range of modern systems, and by extension, that the site will perform well on these systems for years to come.

## Design Visuals

Sometimes, your own graphic designer will prepare visuals of how the site should look. Sometimes our graphic designers will do this for you directly. These snapshots are a guide to the 'look and feel' of the site, and are prepared early in the design process. It's important that as far as possible, these visual details are nailed down early – so make sure that you're happy. Some variation can occur while the site is being built, but this can add time and expense to the process. So – be frank, be clear and let us know when you're not happy (we don't mind being told when you're thrilled, either.)

## The test website

When you've settled on the design visuals, a test website is built based on these visuals. The test website is your website – it is exactly the same code that will eventually be made live to the world. You can view this test website from any computer on the internet, but we keep it at a location not advertised to the general public – making it a private viewing of your site in progress.

We use the test website to make sure that the site will look good on as many computers as possible, to check that the content is right, and to test out any features that we build. It is this test site that we will ask you to check in order to 'sign-off'. At this stage, it does not generally contain any working code – but is an accurate mock-up of how it will work. This mockup, along with the specification, will guide our programmers when their hard work begins.

## Programming / Implementation

Some sites have little dynamic content and don't need much programming, but when it is required, here's what happens:

Implementation of the dynamic elements of the site; databases, CMS (Content Management System) tools and any other programmed features, is only undertaken when the test website mockup has been finalised and approved by you. Because of the complexity of programming, changes during this phase are more difficult and may cost more or introduce delays in the delivery date. That's why we ask you to test the website as completely as possible before this stage. We will let you know on your project specification the point at which changes may affect the timeline and cost.

It may appear that not a lot is happening during this phase – but this is not the case. The mocked-up features of the test website are fleshed out into real and functioning parts of the website. It's kind of like a movie set of a shop front being turned into a real shop while you watch.

## Adding the content / debugging

We add your text and images throughout the design process, but complete a final run-through after the programming has been done to ensure nothing is missing. For clients for who we've built a CMS system or online shop, we will generally help you to load the content in advance.

It is completely normal that while doing this we uncover small bugs, or even oversights in the design that were not picked up during the development. We like to make an allowance of a few weeks to uncover all of these, and we refine, amend and repair all bugs as a part of the overall design fee.

## Training

We like to book clients in for some morning or afternoon tea while we take you through your site. Showing you the ins and outs of your website generally takes an hour, but we are happy to carry out follow up training as needed. Where appropriate we will also provide you with training materials to take away with you.

## Testing your site

Testing your site is so important that it's covered again in Appendix B, which provides a checklist of things for you to look at and test before 'signing off' on the project. It's important to note that we go through our own extensive checklist before any site is launched, but for your own piece of mind and confidence in the project, nothing beats giving it a thorough check-up.

Sometimes the testing and debugging happens after a site has gone live on the internet, but before it has been officially 'launched' to the wider public as a whole. This gives friends, family and colleagues an opportunity to test drive the site for themselves and is often an invaluable way of finding small improvements that could make a big difference to your audience. Once tested, we seek your approval for launch.

## Going Live, and other catastrophes

Your website will not necessarily receive a lot of traffic until you have begun to market it. Although it will soon appear on search engines (see below) nothing beats a bit of advertising and promotion. We prefer to leave that to the experts and have great guys to help you out. However, the one way we can help you directly is in support and advice.

We carry out a 1 month review of your site to discuss in depth any issues that have arisen since the launch. We summarise any refinements that are needed, and we create a plan of action where necessary to make sure that you can confidently continue to run your site.

The key factor is that you must play an active part in the ongoing management of your website – it is not something that will succeed without your help.

## The 90 day review

Once you're up and running, we like to check in with you on a regular basis to make sure that things are going right. For most people this will be about every three months. For busier websites, this might be every month, or even every week!

It may be that you'd like to discuss the website traffic trends you're experiencing, talk about any new technologies or websites that have recently been launched, and plan for future development. Please feel free to make use of this time – we feel it's important to offer ongoing support – and that our responsibility doesn't end when you go online.

## Adding Features

Once your site is online, features can continue to be added incrementally. As mentioned earlier in this document, many of the sites we build grow in stages over a period of one or more years.

The process for planning, designing and developing a new feature is the same as that described for a new website in this document. We will prepare a written proposal including costs and timelines for any major new feature. Then, the feature is developed on a live test website in parallel to your actual website, and transferred only when it has been fully tested and approved.

## Traffic Reports

Your website comes complete with a set of daily 'traffic reports' that are updated in the early hours of each morning. These reports give you a graphic picture of the number of visitors viewing your site, search terms that have been used to successfully find your website, and 'referring' sites, or the websites that users were on immediately before visiting your site.

The traffic reports are accessed using the 'admin' username and password supplied to you when the site is launched, and logging in to your own site. A brief tutorial on the traffic reports is offered during your training meeting, but if you forget all that feel free to call us and we'll go over it in person with you.

## Search Engines

Search Engine Optimisation is a growing service industry in its own right. It is a subject that our clients often ask us about, and around which there is a lot of confusion and misunderstanding. As a general rule, all of our websites are built in an optimised manner, from a technical perspective, from the day they're launched. That means that they are well-structured documents, with a high ratio of content to the underlying code, that they contain as much relevant information as possible (which includes keywords and other 'metadata') and that they are as easy to read for the search engine software as they are for human users.

To explain just what a search engine does, let's look at Google, because it has been so successful that all of the other major search engines have tried to emulate it.

The aim of the Google search engine is simple: to return the most relevant results for a user's query. This is a simple idea, but very important for you to remember.

This should be the key principle you remember: the more relevant your site is to your audience, the better chance you have of improving its ranking in the search results. On the internet, good content always wins over gimmicks and tricks in the long run.

## Making your site more relevant

So; how do you make your website more relevant? As I have pointed out, it is already technically set up to be very 'search engine friendly' but this won't do it on it's own. Content that is up to date, and updated often is always helpful – and that's why we almost always build CMS tools into the websites we build for our customers – so that it's easy to keep the site up to date with rich content.

Don't hide your light under a bushel: many website owners try to 'lock-down' content – showing only general marketing information and little detail. This is OK in some applications, but try to balance your need for control with a users desire to learn more about you and your products. After all, that's probably the reason they've visited your site, so by stopping them, you only frustrate them and they will turn to a source that does supply them with what they need. Far from being solely a principal of user-oriented design, this also has an effect on your search engine performance. Remember, it's about relevancy. Be relevant and informative to your audience and as a positive spin-off, search engines will have more content to index.

## Links

There's another spin-off to having a site that is useful or informative: people will want to provide links to you. It may be professional partners, other businesses or simply colleagues with their own blogs or personal websites – but incoming links to your site are fantastic source of web traffic. Not only do they act as an advertisement (when somebody visits a site and sees a link or recommendation to visit yours) but search engines see them as one of the key measures of a website's relevancy, and will reward you with a better ranking. Obviously, the more popular the site that links to you, the better the spin-off's, but every link counts. Don't be surprised if business acquaintances begin asking if you, in turn, can link back to them.

## SEO, a summary

You do not need to 'submit' your site in order to show up in search engine results, although your ranking can sometimes take a couple of weeks to appear for the first time.

Building a useful service, good information and a depth of up to date and relevant content will always win you a strong audience.

Build as many incoming links to your website as possible. This is as much a matter of business networking as a technical process; simply start asking people you know that run their own websites.

None of these things will 'guarantee' that you will reach a top ranking – the internet is a big place with millions of websites competing for the same thing. It is also very fluid – the search engine databases are being constantly updated and positions change.

## Testing your website Checklist

We know that most of our clients are not necessarily technical people, and so don't often feel comfortable testing and approving technical features. The checklist on the following page will help you to work through your site in a methodical way, and, we hope, give you the confidence to approve or comment on any features.

## Found a problem?

Testing your site for the first time you will undoubtedly come across things that need to be changed, refined or fixed. Some things may be genuine bugs in the system, others simply something you hadn't thought of before. To help you understand the difference between the two we've written a brief description.

## Whats a bug?

A bug is where an unexpected error occurs in your website.

For example when you click an 'submit' button in an online form and an error appears on screen, or if you update a field in your CMS page and the content does not appear on screen. It is something wrong with our development which stops your site functioning as it is supposed to.

Please note that any bug found within your website will be treated as a high priority and corrected free of charge on an indefinite basis.

## What's a change?

A change is something extra to your website that was not discussed during the design phase. It may be a refinement or an amendment.

It may be that after using your site for a some time you decide that you require an additional element of functionality. This is a fairly common occurrence and most requests are easily added. However, should the addition be considerable there may be a charge and additional time required to complete a change.

## How to deal with bugs and changes

When testing your site prior to going live, simply bring in or email to us the completed testing checklist, and we'll go through it to resolve any issues.

When coming across bugs during the normal operation of your website, you can log issues by visiting [www.first4studio.com](http://www.first4studio.com) and filling in the online form.

## Professional and Technical Standards

In the past, the web development industry has suffered from a lack of standards in it's technical implementation, and a lack of accountability amongst it's practitioners.

Using widely supported technical standards protects the investment that our clients make in their websites, and goes a long way to ensure their future compatibility. These are the basic standards we use in all cases:

### **W3C Standards**

We build all of our sites in line with world-wide standards in website authorship: utilising W3C standards in XHTML and CSS. The W3C (World Wide Web Consortium) publishes the standards that guide both software providers (such as Microsoft) and web developers (such as us) in the correct way to markup and

style web pages, so that they are consistent for all users, accessible to people with disabilities, and future-proofed for their owners.

### **Internal Standards**

Secondly, we apply our own internal standards to the way things are written. As a small company, we need to be efficient to compete, and so we write very fast, readable and easily modifiable code. This means that any person editing the site at a later date (even if it isn't us) can quickly locate the parts of the code they need. It's a question of fundamental quality.

Thankyou for taking the time to read through this. If you have any question please do get in touch. We are a friendly bunch and always happy to help.

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