Web redesigns

Remember when mullets were cool? It’s hard to believe that there was a time when someone somewhere thought that ‘do looked good and made a positive statement about who they were.

Just like hairstyles, website designs can become passé. Sure, comparing your website to a mullet might be a bit of a stretch but consider this: While websites were once secondary to other marketing materials, they have become the go-to source of information on a business or organization. In fact, a recent study by Kelsey Research Group, found that 97 percent of consumers research a business or its products and services online before buying locally.¹

What’s more, the proliferation of Wi-Fi and mobile devices means that more people than ever before are accessing the Internet throughout their day, deciding where to shop, eat and conduct business. If a site isn’t compatible with mobile devices, fails to offer the information users are seeking or is otherwise boring or difficult to use, a business or organization is likely to be overlooked.

If your brand hopes to stay relevant to the Internet users of today, website redesigns are a must from time to time. The Internet isn’t static. It’s a moving, growing, changing organism and as such, a website needs to do the same. But how do you know when a site is ready for an update? And how should you approach a website redesign? In this Blue Paper® these questions and others are answered in a step-by-step presentation of the latest data and processes in Web design. Read on to learn more.

Why consider a redesign?

Before we get into the nitty-gritty of Web redesign, let’s consider a few things first: When and why to consider a redesign.

In an ideal world, Web development is cyclical. There is an ongoing process in place that constantly reviews industry website trends, stakeholder needs and how audiences interact with a site as it stands, implementing changes and updating as necessary. Even with this cycle in place, however, there are findings and other events that take place in the greater scheme of business that can pose larger obstacles, obstacles that can’t be solved with minor edits to a site.

A few of these obstacles can be identified by some key red flags:

- **Traffic to a site has waned over time.** This indicates that users either aren’t finding your site or failing to see a reason to return. Paying close attention to website analytics will help identify this obstacle and further pinpoint the culprit.

- **A website no longer reflects a brand.** Logos and color palettes change from time to time and websites need to be updated to reflect these changes for sake of consistency and relevancy. If your business has undergone re-branding or brand updates, now is the perfect time to consider a redesign.

- **A website reflects the past instead of the future.** As mentioned, websites aren’t timeless. Sometimes this is due to design trends. Other times it’s because the Web is maturing and Web designers develop a better understanding of what visitors want. If a site is looking old and tired, it’s probably time for things to change. Furthermore, the content within a website—that information that is most valuable to users—can become outdated. Testimonials from customers and clients, case studies, cultural references and even information about a brand, its mission and vision can get old. Not only is old information a surefire way to ruin search engine optimization—which heavily weight fresh content—but it gives users all the more reason to not return to a site.

- **New research has been revealed.** Even the prettiest of designs can prove pointless in a website if a user can’t easily navigate to the information they are seeking. New research and data are revealed all the time that sheds light on how people use the Internet and what they expect from the websites they visit. Redesigns can allow businesses or organizations the opportunity to take advantage of this information in order to offer the best user experience possible.

- **A major shift has occurred.** Perhaps target audiences have changed or new information has been presented that indicates how best to reach them or what it is that they are looking for. A website should be built and maintained with these audiences in mind and, as such, should change as they change.

- **Competitors are seeing better business.** It’s important for a website to make an impact in order to stay ahead of the curve. Spend a bit of time looking at your competition; analyzing competitor’s sites is one of the most important parts of the redesign process. How does your website compare to theirs?
If any of these reasons for considering a redesign sound familiar, it may be time to get your marketing and Web team on board with moving forward.

**Defining the problem and setting goals**

It’s not simply enough to identify why your business or organization is looking to pursue a website redesign—the “why” has to go further. Why has traffic waned? Why has a shift occurred? In order to fix something you need to know what’s broken and how it became so. In essence, a strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats (SWOT) analysis needs to be conducted before a website redesign action plan can be developed. While more in-depth research will be conducted later on in the redesign process, higher-level consideration to what stakeholders want and need and what purpose your business or organization’s website should serve needs to be established early on in the redesign process.

Start by talking internally with your marketing and executive teams and raise these questions to develop a focus for the overall redesign process:

- Who are we trying to reach with the website, and what behaviors are we trying to encourage?
- What are our overarching business goals and communication objectives and how should the website achieve these?
- Are we just redesigning the look and navigation of the site or do we need to update content, too?
- Can we maintain and update the website we’re envisioning with current staff and volunteers? Do we need to outsource help or project management?
- How much money do we have for this project?
- What do we like about our current site? If money wasn’t an option, what would a new site look like or be able to do and why?
- How will we communicate the redesign to our target audiences?

**Developing a plan**

Using the insight garnered from a SWOT analysis, a plan and goals for a redesign can be developed. While every business and organization will have a slightly different plan, the development process for most websites tends to look like this:

- Step 1: Assemble the team
- Step 2: Research
- Step 3: Develop a site map and wireframes
- Step 4: Identify functionality and select a content management system
- Step 5: Develop the design for the homepage and interior pages
• Step 6: Develop the content
• Step 7: Code the site
• Step 8: Add content
• Step 9: Test and edit
• Step 10: Launch
• Step 11: Celebrate! (And by that, we mean measure and tweak)

Let’s take a closer look at each of these steps within the process …

**Step 1: Assemble the team**

Most businesses and organizations are faced with two options for assembling the website redesign team: Contract with an agency or develop in-house. Agencies are a great option for businesses or organizations that find themselves without the expertise necessary to redesign the website—either from a design point of view or from a technical one. Alternately, keeping things in-house is often a lower-cost option available to those businesses or organizations with a savvy team.

If choosing to go the agency route, submit a request for proposal (RFP) to a handful of Web design companies. Ask to see examples of their previous work, ask for references, and meet with the best candidates in person if possible. Remember that a response to an RFP isn’t a binding agreement. Once you’ve picked a company, work with them to draft a statement or scope of work. This is a formal, signed agreement that outlines the expectations and deliverables on both sides, as well as price and payment information.

If you have the staff resources to handle this project in-house, start assigning the various roles and tasks outlined in your project plan. Most website redsins require the expertise of a Web designer and developer (proficient in creating style sheets and coding a website), a graphic designer (capable of creating a visually appealing site design), an information architect (astute at laying out the architecture of the site to best meet the needs of stakeholders) and a content developer (effective at creating enticing copy and selecting images that best fit the site).

Next up, research.
Step 2: Research

This step of the website redesign process is perhaps the most important. In this part of the process, your team will decide on target audiences, then segment these audiences as best as possible. After this segmentation has occurred, primary research of each audience should take place. We recommend interviewing at least 3-5 internal Web users on your staff and an additional 8-10 external users to find out what they expect to find on your site, what needs they have, how they prefer to access your site and more.

Beyond this information, Sean Carton, chief strategy officer at Boston-based Web agency, idfive, suggests these additional action items for this step in the redesign process:

Determine what's going on with the current site.

Every site redesign needs to start with a thorough analysis of the current site traffic. Look at your site's analytics or break out the server logs for the past six months and run them through a good traffic analyzer like Google Analytics or WebTrends. Look at where people are going in the site, where they're NOT going, what pages they enter in to and what pages they leave from. This kind of analysis will give you a real, quantifiable idea as to what, if anything, is wrong with the current site architecture and content.

Determine how people are getting to your site.

If you’re going to redesign a site, it’s vital that you include all the goodies that make your site rank high in the search engines. Reworking titles, META tags (page descriptions laden with appropriate keywords) and body copy can all work wonders. But all the META-tagging and copy editing in the world isn’t going to help if you don’t know what words to use. Again, look to analytics to determine where people are coming from and what keywords they’re using to get to your site. What are the most popular referring search engines/portals? What other sites send traffic your way? What words are people searching on WITHIN your site? These will be important in identifying changes to be made moving forward.

Determine who's actually using your site and how.

Creating an audience inventory can really help you determine what you need to do during a redesign. Take analytics one step further and pinpoint the actual people using your website—customers, donors, staff members, etc. and segment each as specifically as possible. Then, conduct interviews to get a sense for how these people are using the site, what information they are looking for, what

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complaints or praises they have of the current site and pipe dreams for a new site. Surveys and focus groups are also a great way to get a sense of these same things from a larger population.

Based on this research, evidence of what the redesigned site should look like will become clearer, making the next step a breeze.

**Step 3: Develop a site map and wireframes**
Research should help develop a mental picture of what the site should do and which pages are necessary or superfluous. Step 3 is about putting that into a tangible form through a site map and wireframes.

Whether a site is large or small, users should be able to find the information they need with ease. Content that is easy to find and found in fewer clicks not only results in satisfied site users, but appreciative search engine bots, too.

What's more, it's important that when organizing a website that it is built for scalability. It may be that the client will want to add a new product or service down the road, if the site is built properly to make these accommodations, it will be easier to add the additional pages.

Begin this process by determining the usefulness of existing information on your current site to incorporate in the new site. From here, you can begin to identify the main navigation for the site and then break it down page by page from there. This architecture categorization and taxonomy should be intuitive to all audiences and well-thought out. You should also be thinking about what you want each page “to do”—such as feature calendars, video, etc.

After the map has been created, implement it using wireframe software—software that allows for a navigable mock up of a site—to help finalize content and navigability.

**Step 4: Identify functionality and select a content management system**
Shopping carts, customer log-ins, social media integration, mobile device accessibility, searchable databases, sorting, interactive forms—these are all types of functionality that can be built into a website to enhance design as well as benefit your target audiences. Functionality like this will affect not only how a

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site is laid out but how it is coded and edited, too. For this reason, it’s important to have discussions regarding functionality early on in the redesign process.

Perhaps the best piece of advice when discussing functionality is to keep it simple. Easier said than done, though, right? With new technology, apps and the endless array of add-ons and custom features Web developers can create these days, it’s easy to dream big. In both cases keeping it simple is a tough lesson, especially as it often flies in the face of innovation and reinvention. How do we continue to move forward while making sure people understand how to use our site? Additionally, when is it time to train users on something new instead of only feeding them what they know?4

There are lots of examples in recent history where “keep it simple” and “innovate and change” are not on opposite sides of the argument. Multi-touch screens, for example, are a relatively new innovation that has taken off in mobile technology because it’s so intuitive and simplifies our interaction with devices. In this case, “keep it simple” was already in effect in the form of mobile technology, and things still were made simpler by this innovation.5

After functionality has been determined, and before the redesigned site is built, the Web team should decide how the site will be edited and maintained moving forward. Just because an existing site is maintained one way, doesn’t mean the new site should, too. Perhaps a programmer isn’t familiar with new coding or technology, perhaps the current site is dependent on an agency to update, or maybe management was previously overlooked entirely. Whatever the reason, consider all options.

Content management systems (CMS) are essentially software programs that make maintaining websites fast and easy, regardless of the editor’s familiarity with website coding. Content management systems work by storing the actual content (text and images) in a database. The system can then automatically pull the content out and show it on the appropriate pages based on rules that you establish in advance. The ways you can organize it, and the types of rules you can use, depend on how structurally flexible the CMS is. Additionally, content management systems also separate graphic design from the content itself. This is accomplished through the use of “themes”—graphic design layers that control graphic elements, font and navigation styles, and

page layouts for each page on the site. You simply pre-program the site with a design and utilize the CMS to make slight alterations to the navigation as needed and to update the content.

When it comes to choosing a CMS, there is an endless array of options available and most as open source software—each with benefits and potential downfalls. Which one your business or organization chooses will ultimately depend upon what you need your site to do.

**Step 5: Develop the design for the home page and interior pages**

Now, the fun part: Deciding what your redesigned website will look like and how the appearance of your redesigned site is integrated with the site navigation. When it comes to the look and feel of a website redesign, the main priority should be branding—whatever is created for your new site should reflect the look and feel of your existing brand and other marketing pieces. Beyond this, the new site design should also be easy to navigate and should at the very least consider the latest in industry Web trends. That’s why, as you’re researching for your redesign, attention should be paid to other websites within your industry in order to size up the climate and competition.

While Web design trends can change from industry to industry and audience to audience, Jacqueline Thomas of Web Design Ledger—an online publication devoted to Web design and trends—has pulled together the top Web design trends for 2011 in a recent article. Here are some highlights:

**More HTML5**
Designers are finally starting to let go of Flash. Flash, while fun and … well, flashy, doesn’t play well with many mobile devices and many businesses with Flash-heavy sites have found that mobile users are unable to see their content or even access their sites at all. HTML5 offers much of the same pizzaz as Flash but it’s a more compatible code. In 2011 the shift will become more prevalent for many Web designs.

**Simple color schemes**
Thomas says to forget black and white or shades of gray. Think of green, yellow or even red as your primary color. However, limit your palette to two or three colors. Work within the shades of each color for variety.

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For example, Chicago-based design firm, Collision Lab’s website:

Mobile Ready
Smartphones, iPads, netbooks—there’s a plethora of mobile products available to the consumer in 2011. This means any Web design must be responsive to multiple viewports. Creating a mobile-ready website is not simply about removing the bells and whistles from the design. Instead, with the help of new technology, primarily media queries, mobile Web design has taken a big leap forward. One of the most important advances is that you can design a whole site and allow your coding to conform to the user’s viewing medium.

While it was once tempting to just create a dedicated mobile site separate from a traditional site, that may no longer satisfy an audience. Increasingly, mobile sites include the option to visit the original site. If you do not offer this option or if your original site is not optimized to mobile standards, you are simply not ready for 2011. Forecasters predict that smartphones will outsell personal computers this year. That’s big. Don’t miss this train!

Parallax scrolling
Once reserved for video games, parallax scrolling is making a big debut on the Interwebs. The parallax effect uses layers to present the illusion of a 3-dimensional space. It can be accomplished with some simple CSS tricks or the help of plugins like Spritely. Parallax scrolling can be most effective as a secondary element on your design, such as a header, footer or background. Making it an integral part of your navigation, however, may prove frustrating for your site visitor.

The Old Pulteney Row to the Pole website is one of many examples of sites that have begun to implement this design element. It uses a top-down parallax
scrolling effect for the background, which adds a nice subtle amount of depth and interest.

**Designing for touch screens, not mice**
Digital usability is shifting from abstract to tangible. This means that instead of navigating your mouse to remotely connect, your destination is literally at your fingertips. Tablets, most smartphones and some desktops use touchscreens. Does your design accommodate fingertip navigation?

How much of your design is mouse-oriented? Do images preview on a mouse hover? Are weblinks listed closely together as in a drop down menu? There’s no hovering in touchscreen and thick fingers may struggle with closely grouped links. How will your design indicate links to your visitors?

**Large photographic backgrounds**
Large scale backdrops will surge in 2011. These images will be high resolution, and covering the entire site. What’s more, Thomas believes that trends point to soft and slightly transparent imagery that does not over shadow your content, but harmonizes with it.

Take, for example, travel site iFly’s design:

![Thumnail Design Example](image)

**Thumbnail design**
The ever-enterprising folks at Google have introduced the average user to thumbnail browsing. Gone are the days of clicking through to see the content of a website. These days, you just click on the magnifying glass and hover (assuming you’re not on a touchscreen). Magically before you is a glimpse of what waits on the other side of your click.
If your design is Flash-based, that is definitely going to be a problem. The preview will not display those elements of your design.

As the average Internet user becomes more surfing-savvy in 2011, expect to see more people navigating by these means. It is just too great of a temptation not to judge a site by its thumbnail.

As discussions on the design of your new and improved site prevail, you'll also want to consider a variety of options to present to your team. When working with Web design agencies, they will often develop a general look and feel for the design using just the home page to mock everything up. Once this look is established and approved, they will then add in other elements and details for interior templates, buttons, banner headers and more.

When designing in-house, a similar process can be undergone and presented to higher-level staff or board members for approval.

**Step 6: Develop the content**

After the design is finalized, it's on to the copy and other content. Just as the design of a site needs to reflect a business or organization's brand, the copy of a site needs to speak directly the goals of the website. Copy should appeal to all target audiences and all content should also be optimized for appropriate search terms (more on that in a minute).

As you write copy for your redesigned site, keep in mind that writing for the Web is a very special skill set, much different from other forms of writing. Website
text, or “copy”, needs to be written in a different tone for the Web than, say, a brochure. It needs to be built around the target keywords for the site, be written for a lower literacy audience and laid out in a way that is easily scanned by those users who prefer Internet browsing to Internet reading.

Some additional pointers to keep in mind as content is developed:

- **Don’t try to mimic print materials**
  Yes, language and tone of all marketing materials should align and be consistent. However, this doesn’t mean that it should be identical. Not only is this boring, but brochures and print marketing materials often use sales language that doesn’t scan well on a website, increasing the chances that site visitors will stop reading as soon as they get to your site.

- **Avoid jargon and superfluous language**
  Pharmaceutical giant, Pfizer, conducted an extensive study on Web reading habits in order to ensure that they were communicating effectively with all target audiences on the Web. What they discovered is that 43 percent of Web users are “low literacy” users who have difficulty comprehending and recalling Web content written above a sixth-grade level. Upon further research, it was revealed that top level Web pages should be written at this level, while more in-depth pages located deeper in the site can be written at an eighth-grade level.7

Simple website content promotes effective communication. It is easily processed, understood and connects with readers. Poor communication hinders the information gathering process. Many people fail to realize that most reputable national newspapers are also written at this level. Even TIME magazine, which is by and large deemed sophisticated, is written at a tenth-grade level.

How do you do that? Using Google Docs or your average word processor. Usually somewhere under the Tools menu, select “Word Count.” This will give you a host of statistics, including Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. That figure should be at or around six for your top level pages, as suggested.

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• **Be brief**
  In general, best practice indicates that most Web pages shouldn't be more than 600 words or more than four paragraphs in length.

  Take a page from professional Web writers and use:
  - Relevant headlines
  - Subheads (also known as kickers)
  - Bullet points
  - Short, one-topic paragraphs
  - Descriptive links

• **Be consistent**
  It’s not uncommon for there to be several people adding or updating content to websites at different times, which can lead to inconsistencies. Prior to developing content, if your marketing team hasn’t already, consider creating a style guide that speaks to your preferences for spelling, format, style, narration, tense and more.

After copy comes images and other content. See our Blue Paper on image selection for tips and tricks for selecting the best multimedia for your website redesign.

**A word on search engine optimization considerations**

As we mentioned previously, and as you may well know, a website is only as good as a search engine says it is. Or rather, a beautifully designed site means little if no one can find it. Search engine optimization (SEO) is a tactic that can help ensure that a website redesign hasn’t happened in vain.

Consider these tips from a recent ClickZ article by SEO expert, Mark Jackson:

**Keyword research**
Remember that initial keyword research you conducted in the beginning of the redesign process? Here’s where it moves from high-level research to serious implementation. Take the keywords that people are using to find your site and use a keyword research tool to help determine which keywords should be played up in the copy and coding of your site. Many tools are available for keyword research, including Google's AdWords Tool, Wordtracker and Keyword Discovery.

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Competitive analysis
Once you know which keywords you want to target, you need to determine what it will take to compete (or if it’s even feasible to try). If you determine that a broad keyword like “travel” would be a great keyword, make sure you have loads of content and links already, or have the patience to ride out the long process of building up this kind of authority. You may want to rethink this keyword or add a clarifier to it, like “travel Oshkosh.”

A quick and easy way to check the competitive landscape is to do a Google search for your targeted keyword(s). Find the top 10 ranking websites, then do a “site:www.example.com” search and see how many pages (and links to/from other sites) are indexed for these websites. From there, you can also see how these other websites have built their information architecture and structured their content.

Redirects
If you drastically change the architecture of a website, you may wish to 301 redirect (a coding reference that says “go to this new page”) most every page of the old site to the new URL structure. While it’s ideal to keep the URL structure the same during the re-launch, sometimes that’s just not possible.

Steps 7 and 8: Code the site and add content
Here’s where it gets technical—perhaps more technical than we can go into in this one short paper. Essentially, this step is where the design, the architecture and the content come together to become a tangible, cohesive finished product. It’s when your hard work takes form and can actually be viewed on-screen in a navigable format.

Step 9: Testing ... 1, 2, 3
With any new or redesigned website, you will encounter problems. While the wireframing process and internal testing prior to launch will help, it is inevitable that your site will have bugs, broken links and features that don’t work as advertised. This is why testing with external audiences is an important part of the redesign process. Depending on the size of your site and your budget, you should plan on testing anywhere from a few days to a few months. There are several testing methodologies, most of which could be their own Blue Paper in and of themselves, but here’s a brief overview to get your team started:

Quality assurance (QA) testing: This refers to the basic examination of functionality. Does the site look and act the way you expect it to in all the major Web browsers used by your target audiences? If someone enters information
into a form and clicks submit, does the data go where it's supposed to without getting corrupted? Be sure to examine unexpected behaviors as well as expected behaviors. For instance, a site often works fine until someone types letters into a field designed for numbers only.

**Usability testing:** Usability tests get you as close as possible to the real experience of an end user. You or someone on your Web design team observes the end user as he or she attempts to perform a list of tasks. The user in this situation should be relatively unfamiliar with the site and testing should occur early and often. Wireframes allow you to test throughout the process, as can paper prototypes before a line of code has been written. You can oversee usability testing yourself to save money, but do some research as there are a lot of decisions to make regarding the format and structure.

**Vulnerability testing:** Websites are a popular target for viruses, hackers and other malicious Internet dwellers. A vulnerability testing tool will probe your site and report back about any holes or weaknesses it uncovers. This type of security testing should be an ongoing part of your security strategy.

**Stress testing:** If you expect a large number of visitors to your site, there are tools out there that simulate heavy traffic.

Once testing methods have been identified, and in some cases completed, it's time to launch the redesigned site.

**Step 10: Launch**

In a nutshell, there are two ways to launch a site—a soft launch or a hard launch. Soft launches are those that happen without fanfare—the redesign just occurs without really telling target audiences it's coming. The benefit of a soft launch is two-fold: One, you don’t commit to an external deadline and two, the opportunity to work out any additional kinks in the site that may have been missed in testing is much greater.

Alternatively, a hard launch is one that everyone knows about—it’s been promoted through e-mails, press releases and other marketing and public relations efforts to target audiences, media and beyond. Going this route is a great way to reconnect with target audiences and gain publicity.

At the end of the day, it's important to keep in mind that redesign—and Web design in general, really—isn’t a one-and-done solution. While a redesign of the entire site is a huge idea, feature evolution and improvement is a weekly process.
Once a new feature or new site is launched, the work is rarely over. When redesigning, it’s important to have a post-launch plan. Usually this involves analyzing site usage and metrics and tweaking things once they’re used in the real world. Launches are also generally executed in phases, so preparing for Phase II and Phase III is important after the launch as well to add additional content and functionality that wasn’t possible within the timeframe or budget of the initial phases.

**Step 11: Celebrate! (And by that, we mean measure and tweak)**

Utilizing website analytic tools that have (hopefully) been incorporated into the site redesign will keep a constant eye on traffic. These analytics will be key in identifying additional tweaks that need to be made to the new site, as well as becoming a tool in illustrating the return on investment for the redesign process. Most analytic tools will not only be able to produce traffic numbers, but will also help calculate conversions and patterns.

Don’t let your brand become the mullet of the Web—instead, research and redesign as technologies and users change.