

Planning your website project

Practical advice for structuring and managing the key activities, with advice for success at every stage.

The basis for a successful website project

Get the key elements in place from the outset

If you are planning a website refresh or complete replacement, this paper provides a proven approach to structuring and managing your project, with some tried and tested tips for avoiding the pitfalls and making every step successful.

It is not a short read but could save you many hours as your website project unfolds, not least by helping you get the critical planning and preparation right from the outset.

The project structure and practical tips are based on my experience over the last 25 years, from close involvement with one of the first web content management systems, through planning, project managing and creating the content for new websites and facelifts.

The designer and copywriter need to collaborate from day one. If you don't know who will write the new website texts, get that sorted before diving into designs.

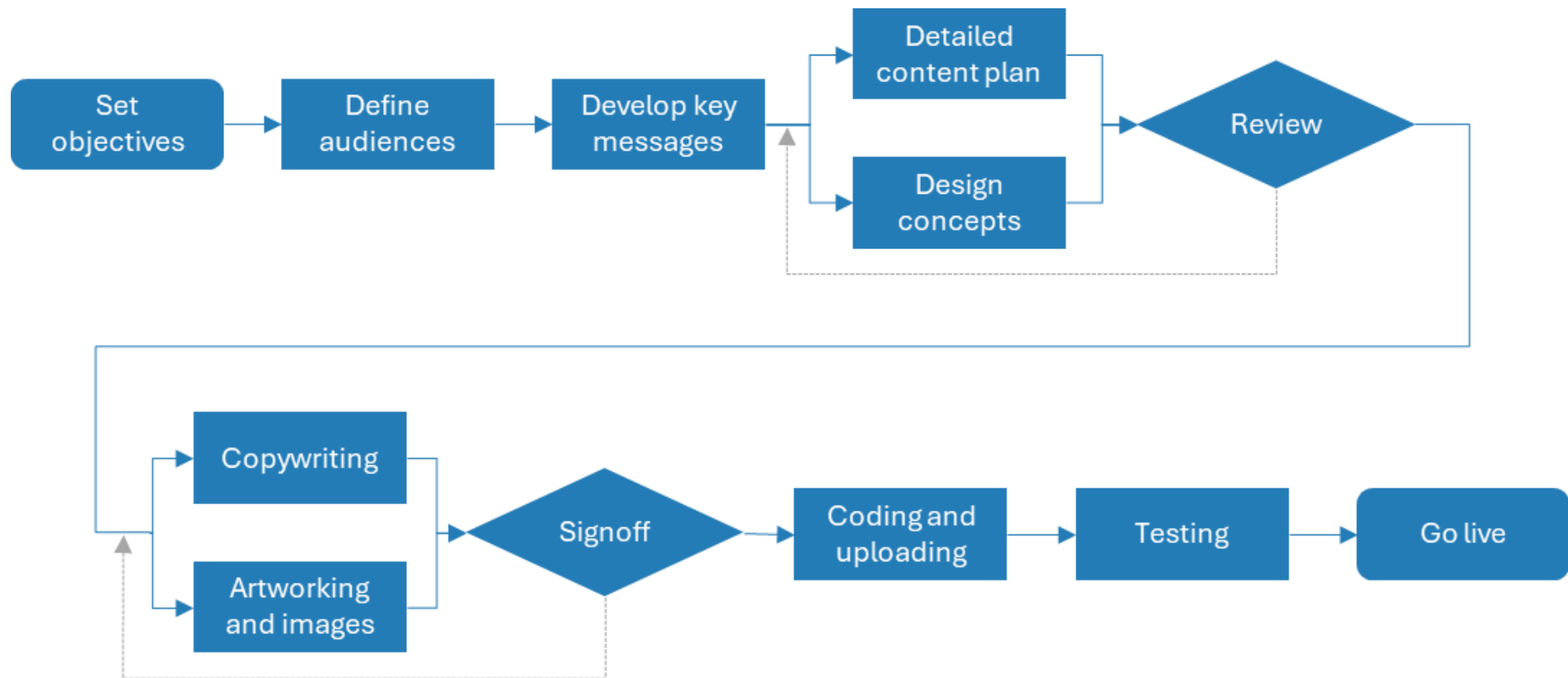
Don't do anything else until the people with final signoff have understood and agreed the objectives, audiences and key messages.

If you don't have time to read any further, take these two points with you.

Your website project flowchart

Start with this tried and tested project structure

These are the key steps which you need to complete for a successful website project. Each of the steps is discussed in more detail on the following pages.



Grounding your project in sales, marketing and customer service

Pin down your objectives and audiences

Like many business activities, creating a new website is far more likely to result in success if you set out with a clear idea of what exactly you want it to achieve.

Often, your marketing, lead generation and sales targets will play a large part in setting the website objectives.

It can be useful to think about this in terms of how the website should influence what the customer *thinks* and *does* at different points in their buying journey. That is, from initial awareness through information gathering, decision making, purchase and beyond.

Setting objectives is one of the most important activities in your website project.

Aside from sales and marketing, there are sure to be other aspects of the business which are helped by having a well-structured, informative website.

Customer service is an obvious example. And if you are in a sector where it's hard to recruit good people, then the website may also be needed to attract new employees or trainees.

If you are considering selling the business then it is also essential that you present your brand and IP in a way that is clear and persuasive to potential investors.



A website is ultimately about the people who visit it, so defining your target audiences is key to objective setting.

Think about all the different people who will be visiting your website and what *they* want to get out of it.

You may have already defined different 'personas' who you work with. If not, then start by considering the different job roles that you come across within your customers, what each of them wants to achieve and the different levels of knowledge that they bring to the purchase process.

And finally, do you need to translate some or all of the site to facilitate sales and show your commitment to other markets? If budget is a concern, you may not need to translate the entire site, but you do need to plan for keeping translations updated as you add or change content on the site.

Developing clear, persuasive messaging and design

Be super clear about messaging and content

You have a short time to persuade visitors to stay on your site rather than going on to the next search result. So your messaging needs to be crystal clear and focused entirely on your audience's needs and expectations.

I find it best to go back to first principles and prepare a short document which captures the value you deliver for customers in just a few bullet points. **This is for internal use only and must be simple and clear. No spin. No clever words. And definitely no ambiguity.**

This is often far more challenging than you first think. If you get stuck with this, or feel it doesn't have real impact, an impartial outsider can provide valuable perspective.

Setting out what makes you the best choice is not easy and rarely quick, but it is essential.

When it comes to producing design concepts and planning the website texts, resist any urge to micro-manage!

Give your suppliers a good brief and then step back. If you think they haven't understood the essence of your business and your customers, then spend more time so that they do (or cut your losses and find someone different before it's too late).

These two steps need to run in parallel; if you present a designer with a lot of completed texts, or ask a copywriter to fit around detailed designs, you will end up with a lot of compromises and/or rework.

It is really important to consider the imagery or visuals that you will use on the website:

Designers often struggle to understand how unphotogenic a lot of industrial equipment can be, and how software rarely lends itself to visual imagery.

There are no easy answers, so make sure you understand the costs and concessions that may be needed.



Reviewing the creative: designs and content plan

Focus on objectives, not personal preference

The first real test of the website creation process is when the designer comes back to you with their initial concepts. Similarly, it can be a tense moment when you first review the detailed site structure and key texts.

But first things first: Who needs to be involved in this review?

On the one hand, you probably don't want the CEO to be there for the first unveiling of design ideas and detailed site structure.

But you definitely need to know who will have a say before the website goes live, so you can make sure they have bought in to the objectives, the design concepts and the messaging rather than judging the final site just on personal preferences.

Encourage your designer and copywriter to develop their ideas far enough that they can really sell them to you. It's rarely productive having them ask your opinion every step of the way.

If you have asked for bold, new designs, then make sure you come to their presentations with a truly open mind. You need to suspend whatever you may have in your mind's eye so you can judge new ideas on their merits.



Modern web pages usually have a lot of elements on them. Make sure your designs and your content plan go to the level of detail necessary to see what each page will communicate and how it will encourage different visitors to interact with the site. **If you need to see more detail to be sure, this is the time to ask for it.**

Designers work on large, high resolution screens, so they may occasionally need a reminder to make sure their work looks equally impressive and fits properly on the screen of, say, a low-end business laptop.

Managing and approving the copywriting, artworking, diagrams and imagery

Be ready to provide input, without delay

If your project activities so far have generated a content plan and design concepts that are sufficiently detailed, then these work streams should now run well.

The designers and copywriters need to keep talking to one-another, from asking about specific design features to requesting additional snippets of texts for callouts.

At this stage, you need to allow time to answer a fair few questions from your copywriter and designers. This may be checking technical details of your products and services or verifying that you are happy with a particular positioning.

Make time to respond to questions the same day, so the creativity can keep flowing, uninterrupted.

If you are having bespoke photography or graphics done for your website, make sure you allow plenty of time to plan and schedule this. It is beyond frustrating when the only thing holding back the launch of the website is a handful of key images.

If you are working with translators, they do tend to work quickly, but you still need to build their activities into your timeline, after the English texts have been finalised and agreed.



Although there may be some crossover between content creation and coding, it is usually most efficient to sign off all the visuals and copy before the technical team do the coding and build-out.

Usually, you will be asked to review and discuss different sections or aspects of the design and copy as they are completed, rather than one big review at the end.

If you think that senior management will want to have the final say, schedule a meeting so you can present the new website to them, in the way that a customer would approach it. In one focused session you should be able to address any concerns and agree any changes, without delay.

Coding, uploading, testing and go-live

Stick to the plan and communicate clearly

By the time you get to the stage of coding and uploading content, there should be very few decisions to make at a management level; it is all about ensuring the final website matches the designs and specifications.

Typically there will be a few compromises to make, as no plan or visual is totally complete in capturing the detail of an interactive, responsive website. But these should be minimal. If in doubt, refer back to the plan: does the proposed change impact the ability to meet your objectives, or is it a detail which you can let go of?

If in doubt, refer back to your objectives and consider the impact on your key audiences.

Nowadays, there is little drama involved in putting a website live. However...

Make sure you have planned well in advance for the switchover of any fast-changing content:

This may involve a short period where you freeze the site prior to migrating live data, or it may be as simple as uploading new articles, posts, etc. to both the old and new websites for a short period beforehand.

Make sure you have discussed the go-live with everyone involved, well in advance.

It pays to have a basic communication plan to share the new site development and go-live.

The most important people who need to know about the new website are your employees and partners. As well as having a stake in your brand and how you communicate with the outside world, they may need to know practical details, such as new resources or changes to key pages.

Most of your customers will have very little interest in your new website until they actually need something. So think carefully about the tone with which you will announce it. As ever in marketing, the key is to ensure that customers can see “what’s in it for me”.

Final thoughts

Practical next steps

When you start discussing a new website, you will find that a lot of people in the business have strong feelings and opinions. The best way to ensure that all your stakeholders are satisfied is to work to a plan, gather input at clearly-defined points and stay focused on the agreed goals.

To wrap up, here a few of my final tips:

I use a Google sheet or shared Excel workbook to manage and collaborate on the key elements of the plan, from agreeing objectives, defining audiences, and setting out the details of messaging and content structure.

Drop me a line and I'll be happy to share the template with you and talk you through my experiences for successful collaboration.

When you are choosing who to work with on your website project, don't feel you have to compromise with a single supplier.

As a marketing specialist, I often provide expertise for planning the website and creating content, while working alongside my client's existing designers.

No good website stands still for long. As you release new products or experience new competitive pressures, the website will inevitably need revising. And you can turn this to your advantage right now:

By talking openly about the next iteration of the website ('version 1.1' if you prefer) and what it may include, you can mop up a lot of potential scope creep and help keep signoffs focused on the here and now.

If you would like some help planning and delivering a website, with a clear focus on your sales objectives and business goals, I'd be happy to share some initial ideas and advice. Start the conversation by emailing me, philip.jones@achaleon.com or calling **01905 317 318**.

The Achaleon team

About the author

I help the directors of software, advanced engineering and hi-tech businesses to make their marketing more effective and persuasive, by drawing out and communicating what is most appealing and valuable to their target customers.

I am a chartered marketer and have worked in the tech sector for over 25 years, supporting innovative new startups, established businesses and companies preparing for trade sale.

I am the founder and Director of Achaleon.



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“ I believe that technology and innovation are the cornerstone of economic growth and sustainability.

My aim is to provide innovative tech companies with marketing that is every bit as impressive as the products and services that they deliver.

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If you would like to discuss how a more focused website and marketing could help you achieve your growth ambitions, please get in touch:

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