

## February 2011 Addendum: 8 Questions to Ask About Your Website

### 1. From your home page, do different audiences know where to find the information that's right for them?

*Tips:* If your organization seeks to get media attention frequently, put a button on the home page that points reporters to the information they need. And/or consider organizing your site's architecture to group information clearly for your various audiences. This can be done via targeted FAQs, for example. As we prepared for a web redesign for a client, we interviewed employees at various levels to find out what they saw as downfalls to their current site. One director-level individual told us, "*Prospects get confused by our site now. It's not intuitive at all. What we need is a site where the prospect can see, at a glance, where information for him will be located.*"

### 2. In your online pressroom, do you offer information-rich fact sheets on topics of interest to the media?

*Tips:* With editorial staffs leaner than ever, the more information you provide, in the format that a reporter wants it, the greater the likelihood that you will get more coverage (assuming, of course, that your news is actually newsworthy). For example, because of an extensive backgrounder we wrote for a major pharmaceutical company's launch of a new eye product, the company gained a tremendous amount of press. We later heard that both feature and science writers easily found information they could use to build their stories.

### 3. Does your site need a glossary?

*Tips:* Many industries have jargon and acronyms that are specific to them. You can't assume, for example, that all science reporters will understand such common pharma terms as pharmacovigilance, genomics, late stage, EDC, etc. In fact, it's likely that they come from a variety of backgrounds, like journalism or English or history. Imagine, for a moment, that you're asked to write a story about EDC and you have no idea what that is. If you Google the acronym, here are just a few of the phrases that pop up: Education Development Center, Electrodesiccation and curettage, Eau de Cologne, Electric Daisy Carnival, Export Development Canada, and so many more! Clearly, with the burgeoning of technologies and services, helping reporters understand the basic terms is more than a courtesy. It helps you get coverage.

#### **4. Are biographies about key personnel written in a way that allows your important audiences to grasp the value of their credentials and experience?**

*Tips:* If you're a young company trying to break into a cluttered industry, for instance, it's not enough to include very broad biographies that create no sense of confidence in your team's experience. Such obvious tidbits as "He studied here; she worked there." just aren't enough. What you want to demonstrate is how this person's background puts him in position to be of greater value to a prospect or client. And if you're in a human services business, be sure to reveal your team's humanity. (I'd argue that you want to reveal some personality in every bio, certainly of the leadership.) Of course, you want to include contact information, as well.

#### **5. Can your site help attract the right potential new hires?**

*Tips:* Your organization has a culture, a personality, and a rhythm that are unique to you. Your site should reflect this uniqueness through content, language, and even visuals. Does your site say "stuffy and conservative" or "young and hip" – or does it say nothing at all meaningful about you? A start-up medical company executive once shared, with some frustration, that new employees were surprised by the roll-up-your-sleeves requirements of their organization, since many had come from large, multi-layered companies where they were expected to delegate to layers of staff that did not exist in this smaller environment. Can your website help set the stage for your culture? Absolutely!

#### **6. Is your site easy to navigate?**

*Tips:* If you want an honest answer to this question, ask an outside, neutral party (sure, like your marketing agency, but it doesn't have to be) to conduct confidential interviews of different target audiences. In our experience, in a confidential setting, people are willing to be brutally honest. For one web audit we did, a high-level person within that organization complained, "*The website is adding to clients' confusion. They can't find core elements of our service. So they have given up.*"

#### **7. Should you build a robust, multi-tiered website or a simple brochure-style website?**

*Tips:* You know that you have to refresh your website periodically. And you know that there should be reasons for web visitors to come back. But how robust a website do you really need? The answer to this question depends on what you want your site to do. How much content *must* be provided to help your audiences glean the information that is key to them? What kinds of interactions do you want people to have? That is, will they order

from the site? Or do you simply want to intrigue them enough to pick up the phone and call you? Does your audience care to read in-depth scientific papers or do they want a nice, clean paragraph about a new product? And how important is it to include the mission statement? (My tongue-in-cheek answer would be “How good is the mission statement?” If it’s just a “we want to be the best-in-class company offering the best service and best products blah, blah, blah,” I’d skip it. Better yet, I’d rewrite it or eliminate it.)

## **8. Before your new website goes live, should you alert your staff?**

**Tips:** Yes. In fact, we’re firm believers that all staffers should know about any major initiatives before they are launched. When properly informed, they can be your strongest advocates – and who wants you to see your business success more? But don’t just send an email that says, “check out our new website.” Introduce the site’s goals and changes, while inviting feedback. Even better, gather input about the new site direction before you make the revisions. In our experience, employees can provide powerful feedback about the pros and cons of the existing site – and about how the site needs to change.

### ***Final thoughts:***

What if you know that your website is not where you want it to be, but you can’t afford a brand new site? The Zimmerman Group conducts website audits designed to help you assess what is working best, what is working least.

Here are just a few of the parameters that we consider:

1. Do the messages reflect your current philosophies, products, and services?
2. Do your visuals reinforce these messages?
3. Have you considered communication to each audience segment? For instance, perhaps your current customers, who already know what products they want and how to use your online system, are getting exactly the information they need. But what about your prospects? Or the media? Have you addressed their needs? .
4. Is your site easy to navigate?
5. Is it organized in a way that makes sense?
6. Are you using outdated technologies that make your site slow to load?
7. Have you maximized SEO (search engine optimization)?

We help you determine where the biggest needs are and how to address them.

Sometimes, a simpler site that is more on target is far better than maintaining a robust website that is outdated or confusing or sends the wrong messages about your company.

And sometimes, there are techniques that can boost your site’s effectiveness, without a total overhaul. For one client, we didn’t have the budget for a complete makeover, so we maximized what there was: we recreated certain information to make it easier to find; we added bits that were missing; we made the ordering process easier. Now, the site

functions well, searches well, and sends the right messages. While it's not everything we might have wanted to do, it is, demonstrably, helping to build sales for the client.

For more about either website audits or website overhauls, contact Ellen Zimmerman at [ez@zimm.com](mailto:ez@zimm.com) or 540-722-8888.