10 things you can do to improve your Web site right now

Takeaway: Even if you don't have the time or resources for a full-blown site redesign, you can make some small, easily implemented tweaks that will have a huge impact.

We often look at our Web sites and know that they need to be overhauled, but we just do not have the time to do it. A major Web site redesign project can takes weeks or months (depending on the size of your site and the technology underneath it) to complete. Meanwhile, your site is turning away visitors *right now*. Here are 10 easy things that you can do to improve your site.

1: Make your contact information more prominent

Most companies' sites need to sell products, services, and so on. By making your contact information easier to find, you raise trust and allow visitors to initiate the sales process more easily. If you have a phone number you want customers calling, it should be in large letters, at the top of every page. If you have a "Contact Us" page, it should be one of the most obvious links on every page.

2: Don't mix HTTP and HTTPS

Mixing HTTP and HTTPS elements on pages can lead to annoying security warnings and incomplete page rendering. Using relative links throughout the page's HTML, and having your AJAX calls detect what protocol to use, will ensure that all content comes through the right channel, eliminating those problems.

3: Add better analysis

It takes only a few minutes to add Google Analytics to your site, which will help you get a long-term idea of your search engine situation and what pages users have problems on and will highlight all sorts of other information. If you have a Web application, newcomer Totango (currently in a public beta) provides similar instrumentation specific to application events, and it is also easy to add to your application.

4: Create print-specific CSS styles

Don't you just hate it when you print a Web page, and the page is mostly whitespace and navigation? What looks good on a monitor in landscape orientation usually does not work so great on the printed page. Luckily, CSS allows you to define (or override) styles based on the type of device viewing it. Creating some print-specific styles is easy, I've found that just omitting the navigation, banners, footers, etc., and making it consume the full width of the page can do a lot, and it takes only a few minutes. While you are there, make another set of changes

for mobile browsers that resizes and repositions elements to fit mobile devices better. It may not be as good as a mobile-specific site, but it takes a lot less time, and anything is better than nothing.

5: Make sharing better with image_src

Ever wonder how some sites get their logo or just the right image to show up automatically when you share a page on Facebook and other sites? That's done with the image_src item. This simple 30-second change gives you much better control over how your company looks on social networks and makes it easy for people to spread the word about you.

6: Ditch the dead weight

It's easy for a site to accumulate a lot of extra junk over time, especially things like references to JavaScript that is no longer being used. Audit your site and see what is being included that is not actually needed and get rid of it. Your page load speeds will improve and users will be happier.

7: Use alt text

This one has been mentioned so many times by others, yet Web designers and developers still fail to heed it. Putting alt text on your images does more than give a useful tool tip, it allows search engines and disabled users to make sense of your site. Adding the alt tags takes very little time, and a number of tools will even identify images without it for you.

8: Write for your audience, not your c-level execs

Take a look at the wording on a lot of sites, and they seem more like the "new employee handbook" than something designed to attract customers. The problem is usually caused by management teams who are trying to convey a corporate message (often using a lot of jargon that means something to employees but not to customers). Site visitors don't care about that message. Put yourself in the customers' shoes, and reword your content so it speaks their language, not yours, and you will see people sticking around longer. You may even get some search engine benefits too.

9: Get the content out of PDFs and into HTML

Many times, we're fed a bunch of content for the site in PDF format (or as Word documents). Whether it is through a lack of time or some mandate from someone, the content goes onto the site as-is. Unless there is a compelling reason to keep the content in those formats, you should take the time to get them into HTML pages instead. My experience has been that most visitors really dislike Acrobat or Word popping open or a file downloading unless it is absolutely necessary.

10: Remember that silence is golden

If there is one thing that will drive users off your site quickly, it's a page that makes noise without their consent. All videos should either be muted by default or should require a deliberate user action to start playing. Do spot checks of any advertisements on your site to make sure that they aren't playing videos with the sound on by default as well. Users remember which sites surprised them with a barrage of noise, especially if it happened at the workplace or some other embarrassing moment, and avoid them like the plague.