

Graham Jones
Internet Psychologist



Planning for multiple web sites

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A multiple web site strategy can help many companies achieve more online. Most businesses target more than one kind of customer. If your company has a single web site trying to reach all your different target groups, you end up with a rather general site that actually appeals to no-one. The only way out of this is to have multiple web sites focused on specific targets and niches. Furthermore, you may need a number of different web sites for each target group, focused on specific outcomes. Few people linger on a web page for long. If your potential customers have to spend time working out what you expect them to do, or if they have to search for what they really want, you will lose them to competing web sites that offer greater clarity. The only way you can be completely clear is with multiple web sites, targeted at specific outcomes for each particular niche group. This guide helps you plan and organise your multiple web site strategy.

1. Understand your own business

The first step in any multiple web site strategy is to take a good, hard look at your own business and work out EXACTLY what you offer and to which specific kind of customers. Don't simply say something like "we are accountants who offer a full service to small businesses". Instead say things like "We provide weekly bookkeeping for sole traders" or "We complete the VAT returns for companies who use cash flow reporting". In other words, look closely at the very specific services and products you offer and describe your customers for each of those exactly. You may find it easier to compile your information in a spreadsheet table.

2. Talk to your customers

Spend some time talking to your customers to find out two things. Firstly you want to know what specific products and services they most value from your company. Secondly, you need to find out what words and phrases they associate with your business, your products and your services. Record your conversations, if possible, and analyse the content so you get a good idea of the way your customers perceive you and your products.

3. Research keywords

The Internet is indexed using keywords and phrases. You need to find out which words and phrases are appropriate for your products and services. With your own understanding of your business and your discussions with your customers (steps 1 and 2 above) use Wordtracker (www.wordtracker.com) to find keywords which people type into search engines which are associated with your business, products and services. The words your customers use will be invaluable here, as they may associate words with your business that other people also type into search engines and which are words you may not have come up with yourself.

4. Analyse your keywords

Once you have completed your keyword research, look at your findings and sort your keywords according to your products and services. Group the keywords and rank them in terms of value to you - and the extent of the competition (revealed in your Wordtracker research). Looking through your

analysis you will be able to see which keywords, products and services will be suitable candidates for separate web sites. For instance, if you have a product which only has one or two keyword searches and for which there is relatively high competition, a separate web site would be costly and time consuming. However, if you have a product or service which is associated with several different keywords and phrases and which also has little competition, then this will make a very good candidate for a separate web site. Analyse your data and work out which products and services would be good value for separate web sites.

5. Research possible domain names

Once you have a list of possible separate web sites, you will need to find domain names for them. It is a good idea to buy all your domain names from a supplier that is separate to your hosting company. This means that you can easily change your hosting company in the future if necessary. A good place to get your domain names (and control all the technical features of them) is Domain Monster (www.domainmonster.com). At Domain Monster you will be able to research domain names and order them - even if you don't plan to use them straight away. Get the domains you want, before someone else snaps them up. Try to use your most valuable keywords in your domain names.

6. Look for a suitable hosting company

You will need a hosting account that is capable of handling several web sites at the same time. This will ease administration and will save time and money. There are several options for hosting. You could search for companies that provide multiple web site hosting; often a "reseller" account is best as this allows several web sites within one account. An alternative is a "CPanel" hosting account as this allows you to have "add-on" domains. You could also consider a "virtual server" or a "dedicated server". An excellent UK company that provides such a range of services is NetHosted (www.nethosted.co.uk).

7. Choose a content management system

Your multiple web sites will need to be updated regularly to make them attractive to your readers and to the search engines. The easiest way to achieve this is with a "content management system". Many reseller accounts, the CPanel accounts and many virtual servers come with a range of content management systems pre-installed. They include WordPress, Joomla and Drupal. You will need to investigate these systems and determine which is most appropriate to your specific needs and preferences. If in doubt, WordPress (www.wordpress.org) is suited to many business needs.

8. Plan a standard structure

You will want to avoid "re-inventing the wheel" when it comes to multiple web sites. So, consider a structure that will be applicable to all. Think about whether each web site will have several layers or sections. Will you need a contacts page, an "about" page and so on? What will your footer say? What "links" page will you need? The more you can have in terms of a "boilerplate" system the better, as this will save you time.

9. Plan your content

The next aspect of planning is in terms of content for each of your separate web sites. What topics will each web site cover? (The keyword research should give you some clues...!) How often should you add material on these topics? A web site that is not updated regularly is of little value to people - and it is less attractive to search engines. But how often should each of your web sites be changed and added to? What's right for one niche may not be appropriate for another. So, in addition to planning the kind of content, also work out a "publishing" schedule for adding new content.

10. Plan content contributions

Once you know the kind of content you want and when you want it, you can now consider who is going to produce it. This might be you, your staff or an outsourced supplier. Whoever it is, you will need to brief them properly and get them producing the right kind of material, using the appropriate keywords and to the schedule deadlines. You can find suitable content producers at Elance (www.elance.com).

11. Choose your design

If you are using content management software you will need to select a suitable "theme" for your web sites. You can also get themes designed specifically to match your corporate branding. There are plenty of themes designers for each of the content management systems that can be found either using Google or by looking in Elance. There are, though, plenty of free and low cost themes from sites such as Template Monster (www.templatemonster.com).

12. Set up your first site

Now you have your design and your content underway you can set up your first site. Go to your domain company and adjust the settings so that your domain points to your hosting account. The details for doing this will be provided by your hosting company. Then install the content management system and your theme. Now, set up all the standard structures for your web site (such as the Contacts page and the About Us page). Also, be sure to set up any email addresses your site will need.

13. Add initial content

For your first web site, add in all the relevant content using the keywords in the following ways: in the <TITLE> tag for each page, in the <H1> headline and in the URL. For instance, let's imagine your keyword was "VAT returns completed for you". This phrase would need to be in the "behind the scenes" aspect of the web site as the <TITLE> of the page. It would also be the page H1 tag - the bold part in large letters that people see as the main headline. It would also need to be in the URL as in "www.websitename.com/vat-returns-completed-for-you.html". If you use WordPress or Joomla, then you do not need to concern yourself with such technicalities as this is all done automatically for you. With your keywords in these three places - and within the text of the page - search engines are in no doubt as to what your page is about.

14. Set up further web sites

Now that your first web site is set up all you need to do is repeat the exercise for subsequent web sites. Having completed all the tasks once, repeating them for the additional web sites you need to construct is comparatively easy.

15. Let people know about your web sites

Creating a variety of web sites for specific niches is good - but only if people know about them. You will need to promote each web site to each of your target markets individually. You can find various booklets on promoting your web sites at www.grahamjones.co.uk/freebooks.

16. Refresh the content

Now that your web sites are up and running - and hopefully attracting visitors - you need to add new content according to your schedule. Set aside diary time to review new content and add it to each site. Also, plan new content ideas and forward these to your contributors.

17. Start to analyse your sites

After your site has started to attract people and is being updated regularly you can begin to analyse the impact you are having. Because each of your sites is aimed at a specific purpose - such as buying a particular product - you will know the outcomes you are looking for. Build these into your Google Analytics account so that you can measure the impact of each of your web sites. See: www.google.com/analytics.

18. Grade your sites

Once you have set up Google Analytics you can take a look at how well your sites are doing in comparison to the competition. The best way of assessing this is by using the various tools at Grader (www.grader.com).

19. Re-check your keywords

Even though your new web sites may be working well, unless you re-check your keywords regularly, you may find your site begins to lose favour. That's because keywords are rarely "static". Tastes, fashion and language all change and as a result some keywords lose popularity and new ones arrive on the scene. If you are not evaluating your keywords every few months your web sites could become less popular.

20. Adjust your content

If keywords change, you may need to remove some of your content, or add new content to take into account new words and phrases.

So, these are the 20 main steps you need to take in order to succeed with multiple web sites. As you can see, most of the work is done in the planning. The design is the least important aspect of your multiple web site strategy. Fundamental to the success of your multiple web sites is finding out what is going on in your customer's mind and then providing a web site that matches. That's why talking to your customers and conducting keyword research is so important. You should not skimp on this aspect of producing multiple web sites.

Graham Jones

Internet Psychologist



Tel: 0118 336 9710
Email: graham@grahamjones.co.uk
Web: www.grahamjones.co.uk
Twitter: www.twitter.com/grahamjones
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/grahamjones
Facebook: www.facebook.com/grahamjones.uk
Post: Unit 38, 105 London Street, Reading RG1 4QD

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Unit 38, 105 London Street, Reading RG1 4QD
Tel: 0118 336 9710
www.grahamjones.co.uk