



rSquare

www.rsquaredesignstudio.com

an essential guide to small business website design

introduction

We'd like to welcome you to our guide to designing your next small business website. The purpose of this guide is to help small businesses who are looking to self-build there website, while avoiding some of the pitfalls that are typical for DIYers.

We will be laying out simple to follow steps, such as getting organized, the importance of domain names and choosing the right DIY platform. We'll explore website content and finally touch upon the final checks before you launch.

What you won't find in this guide is a bunch of technical stuff and get you caught up in what some may call 'geek speak'. Our goal is simply to give you the knowledge to get you started on designing your small business website.

Stuff you'll find in this guide:

1 planning

getting you prepared and begin your project

2 platform

what you need, how to decide and how to get it

3 content

resources and how to procure the best content

4 design

get you started with web design basics

5 seo

seo basics to improve your business ranking

6 launch

your final checklist and website check-up tool

1

planning your website design

Planning is critical for any project. It'll simply help you move through the design process with a whole lot less heartburn.

So, let's begin...

1.

OUTLINE YOUR WEBSITE

Determining what you'd like on your website should be your first step.

Begin by thinking about the basic structure of your site:

Home Page

- Hero image.
- Headline or key message
- Call to Action

About

- Tell your audience about your business

Services/Products

- List and description of your services - or -
- Your product/online shop

Contact Page

- Make it easy to reach you

Optional

- Blog
- Gallery
- Featured Product or Services

You get the idea. By planning your website's structure you can begin planning on what content will be needed and what your design requirements will be.

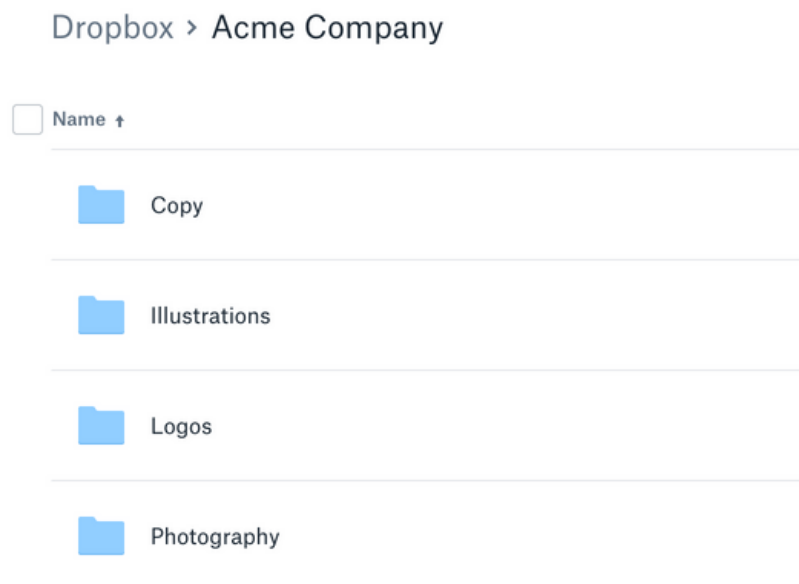
Tip: review your competitor's sites and borrow from their best practices.

1.2

CONTENT GATHERING & ORGANIZING

Before you gather all your assets you should consider where you are going to save them. We recommend a cloud-based solution and not your local hard-drive for obvious reasons. Having them organized in one central location will make your design process go a lot more smoothly.

Your folder structure should resemble something like the following:



We recommend Dropbox. Dropbox does not share your information and your information is anonymous, unlike Google Drive.

Get started by following the link below:

Dropbox

(right click and open in new tab)

Tip: make sure you name your files with your business's name and a brief description; such as: 'Acme Company Sales Team'. This will be extremely helpful for the purpose of SEO.

1.2

GATHER & ORGANIZE cont.

Now that you have your website's basic structure complete let's begin thinking about the required assets (images, logos, etc) and what formats you should be saving them in.

Here are the primary assets that you should be gathering before you begin your design:

Logos

- Must be in PNG format with a transparent background.
- Have a color, a black, and a white version created.

Images

- Custom v. Stock - consider custom photography since it will be viewed as more authentic but there are some terrific stock options as well.
- Select a 'hero' image - this is the main image that will be featured on your home page - it should be bold and reflect your business.
- Review your website outline to determine your photo needs.

Copy

- Base your copy needs on your website outline.
- Create drafts of your copy using Pages or Word and save them by website page and section.

Illustrations/Icons

- You may want to consider the use of illustrations or icons - these are terrific to create visual interest and call out specific details.
- These too must be in PNG format with a transparent background.

Tip: make sure all your photos are optimized (compressed) for the web otherwise this will lead to slow website load times and as a result a loss in potential business.

1.3

DOMAINS

A domain is the entry point to your site and without it, you simply do not exist on the web. The domain name you select will be with you for a long time - so choose wisely.

You'll need to decide on a name and extension. Before deciding on your extension you need to determine what extensions are available using your business' name. In some cases the .com extension may not be available. If this is the case then you'll need to select an extension that best reflects your business. As an example rsquare.com was taken so based on my business I selected rsquare.design.

We recommend using Namecheap to search and secure your domain name and extension; it's intuitive and their prices are awesome.

Get started by following the link below:

Namecheap

(right click and open in new tab)

The screenshot shows the Namecheap domain search interface. At the top, the domain 'rsquare.design' is displayed with a green checkmark and a 'SPECIAL' badge. The price is listed as '\$8.88/yr' with a note 'Retail \$42.88/yr' and an 'Add to Cart' button. Below this is a search bar containing 'rsquare.design' with a 'Bulk Options' link and a search icon. Under the search bar are four tabs: 'Popular', 'New', 'Discounted', and 'International'. At the bottom, the domain 'rsquare.design' is shown again with the 'SPECIAL' badge, the price '\$8.88/yr' (Retail \$42.88/yr), and an 'Add to Cart' button.

Tip: purchase your domain name for multiple years to save yourself some money and the headache of having to remember to renew your domain each year. You may also want to consider purchasing alternative extensions; such .net, etc.

1.4

EMAIL FOR BUSINESS

Now that you've secured your domain name and extension it's now time to get your business email. A professionally branded email is essential for any business; it adds credibility and conveys professionalism.

Many registrars (domain hosts) offer hosted email, however, we don't recommend any of these as we've found them to be unstable - you rely too much on email so don't risk it.

We recommend that you set-up a G-Suite account through Google. A G-Suite account will give you not only a branded email but also access to all of Google apps that can be used for your business. It's also easily integrated into any mail app.

Get started by following the link below:

Google G-Suite

(right click and open in new tab)

When you set up your email you can either begin with a generic email address (info@acmecompany.com) or an individual email address (john@acmecompany.com).

Tip: remember to set up alias emails to be directed to your primary email address thus eliminating the need to set up multiple email accounts, which will also save you money.

1.5

REGISTER YOUR BUSINESS

It's time to claim your business listings. This is especially vital for any local business, but don't be fooled it applies to all businesses and organizations. This listing is your gateway to connecting with consumers searching for businesses like yours.

There are two primary platforms that are a must for businesses to register with; Google and Bing. Although Bing has considerably less traffic than Google it does rank number two in local business search.

There are also paid services that can assist you with this, however, we've found that the paid services, although very comprehensive can be a costly option.

Claiming your business, with Google , is a two-step process. After you've claimed your business listing you will be sent a postcard to the address you assigned as your official business address. The code that will accompany the postcard will be used to verify your business is legit.

Get started by following the links below:

Google Business

(right click and open in new tab)

Bing Business

(right click and open in new tab)

Tip: be sure to complete your listings by adding photos, links to your website (once complete), and your hours of operation. Do not skip this step.

2

selecting a platform

There are dozens of website builders to consider. For the purpose of keeping things manageable; we will be focusing on three of the most popular and intuitive platforms.

2.1



Squarespace has been around since 2004 and has developed their platform from a simple website builder into an intuitive eCommerce platform. They are known for their award-winning customer support, available 24/7 and their continual efforts in releasing new design features and products (recently launched a fully integrated email platform in direct competition with MailChimp).

Who is this platform perfect for?

- Online Stores
- Art & Design
- Community & Nonprofit
- Food & Drink
- Entertainment & Media
- Photographers
- Creative Services
- Fashion & Beauty
- Health & Fitness
- Home & Living
- Music
- Professional Services (legal, medical, etc)
- Home Improvement
- Travel & Leisure

As you can see they cover just about every industry. They have a collection of beautiful templates that will surely impress.

Get started by following the link below:

Squarespace

(right click and open in new tab)

Tip: you may be tempted to subscribe to the lowest priced package; if you're a legitimate small business or online store make sure you select the right package based on your current and potential needs.

2.2



Shopify is by far one of the most popular eCommerce platforms. Shopify has the ability to scale as you grow and would be recommended for anyone that is serious about developing a full-scale eCommerce business. Shopify offers a ton of third-party integrations that are easily integrated into most sites.

Although the platform is fairly intuitive the templates are not fully customizable and can leave you constrained. There are plenty of Shopify developers that can help you customize your site but if your okay with the templates as they are, then Shopify is certainly a platform to consider.

Who is this platform perfect for?

- Online Stores

Shopify is the clearly an eCommerce platform built to help businesses develop and expand their online retail business.

Get started by following the link below:

Shopify

(right click and open in new tab)

Tip: make certain to review and test each template before you commit. Changing templates after you've designed your site is not seamless.

2.3



Very similar to Squarespace, Wix has a very nice drag and drop interface and they provide good customer service for paid accounts. They've been around since 2006 and proved to be a solid platform for small businesses. The platform integrates with many of the popular services similar to Squarespace. Their eCommerce option is fairly limited, however, it would suffice for those businesses not needing an eCommerce option quite well.

Who is this platform perfect for?

- Art & Design
- Community & Nonprofit
- Food & Drink
- Entertainment & Media
- Photographers
- Creative Services
- Fashion & Beauty
- Health & Fitness
- Home & Living
- Music
- Professional Services (legal, medical, etc)
- Home Improvement
- Travel & Leisure

As you can see they cover just about every industry. They have a collection of beautiful templates that will surely impress.

Get started by following the link below:

Wix

(right click and open in new tab)

Tip: you cannot change your template once you've started your design. So choose carefully. Opt for a paid subscription or your site will be riddled with Wix ads.

3

procuring content

The right content will engage your visitors and convert them into customers. Content is certainly king.

3.1

PHOTOGRAPHY

Imagery and visual cues are a great way to draw and engage your audience. To create visual interest and connect with your visitors photography is by far the most impactful and accessible options for most small businesses.

There are a few of ways you can approach procuring the perfect images for your site:

CUSTOM PHOTOGRAPHY

This is the preferred method as it gives you creative control of the imagery and brand messaging and conveys authenticity.

When selecting a photographer there are a few things to consider:

- Do they have experience with the type (food, product, people, staged, etc) of photography you're looking for?
- Do they have a portfolio of work? If so, what is there style? And do you like their style?
- How do they plan their shoot? Do they wing it or do they work off an outline? This could have a big impact on cost and time.
- What is their fee structure (hourly, by photo, etc)?
- Do they edit the images themselves? Is basic editing included?

Note: We recommend that all food and product photography is custom curated.

Tip: make sure your photographer releases ownership of the photography to use as you decide.

3.1

PHOTOGRAPHY cont.

PAID STOCK PHOTOGRAPHY

Paid stock photography gives you more options to choose from than free stock images and many of the sites allow you to search images more narrowly than many of the free stock image sites.

Some might think that quality would be higher for paid images; this is not necessarily the case. Ironically, the quality between the two (paid & free) is negligible.

The benefit of using a paid site is simply that it eliminates much of the hunting for the perfect image since they showcase a deeper and wider breadth of options.

Here are a few options that have high quality images:

iStock

(right click and open in new tab)

Getty Images

(right click and open in new tab)

Death to Stock

(right click and open in new tab)

Tip: be sure to look for and procure 'royalty free' images - not all images are royalty free.

3.1

PHOTOGRAPHY cont.

FREE STOCK PHOTOGRAPHY

Before you consider free photography note that finding the right photography can be cumbersome and requires a lot of patience.

When selecting among free images it's important to consider style. Photographers have their own style and by selecting images that deviate drastically in style will lead to visual inconsistency - this is a clear indicator that you're using stock images. Instead, search for images that compliment one another or are produced by the same photographer.

There are loads of great sites that offer free images, with a little effort you're bound to find the perfect images for your site.

Here are a few good resources to get you started:

Unsplash

(right click and open in new tab)

Stockup

(right click and open in new tab)

Life of Pix

(right click and open in new tab)

Pexels

(right click and open in new tab)

Pixabay

(right click and open in new tab)

Burst

(right click and open in new tab)

Tip: if asked please remember to recognize the photographer. This is the your cost for using free photography.

3.2

COPY

Second to imagery is your copy. Strong copy and messaging are critical in your design. As you plan your copy and before you begin writing consider the following:

- Remember who you're writing for. Understand your audience.
- You have approximately 60 seconds to get your visitor's attention.
- Copy should be concise and to the point.
- Unfortunately, we live in a bullet-point world. Get to your talking points in no more than one short sentence.
- Make sure your copy utilizes your businesses keywords.
- Use your Header 1, Header 2, and Header 3 to describe your page content (briefly).
- Have fun with your copy make it approachable, don't litter it with industry jargon unless you absolutely have to and/or your audience expects you to.

Tip: write in your own voice. Edit, edit, edit, proofread, proofread, proofread.

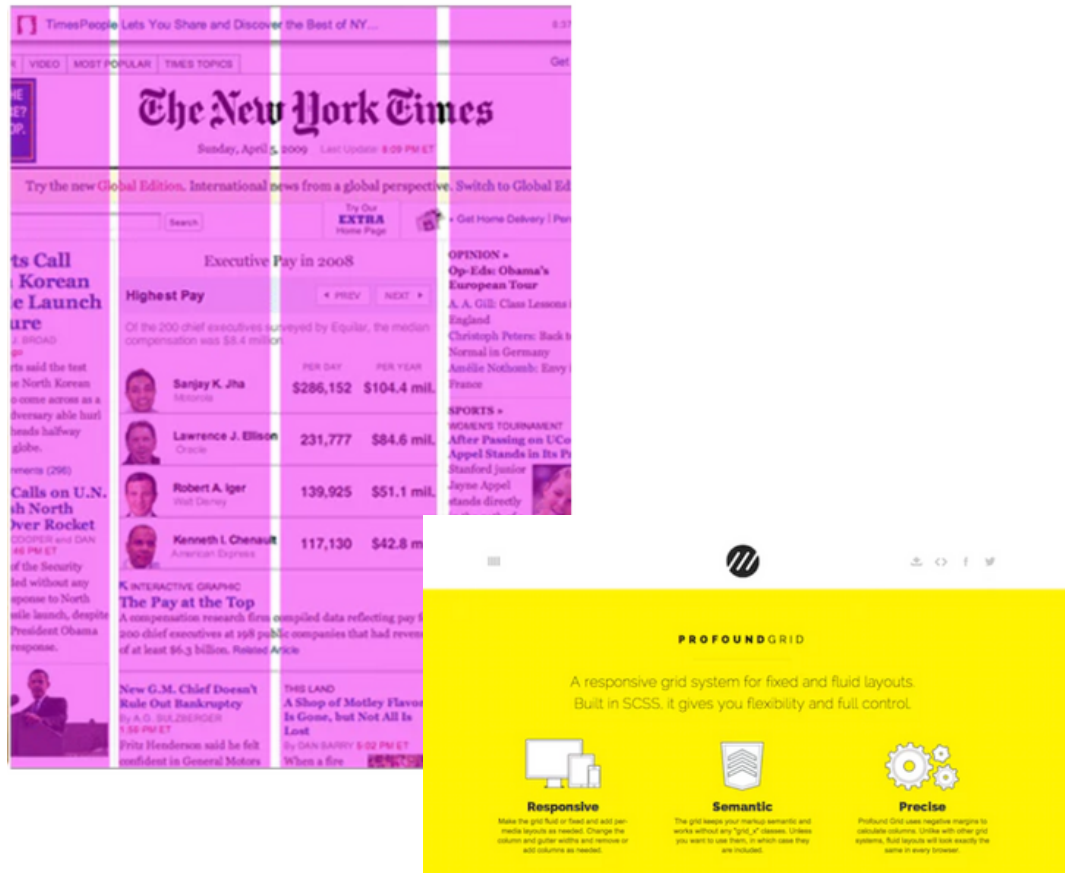
4

designing your website

Your design, layout, and structure are going to play a vital role in engaging your visitors. Usability is key.

4.1

GRID SYSTEMS

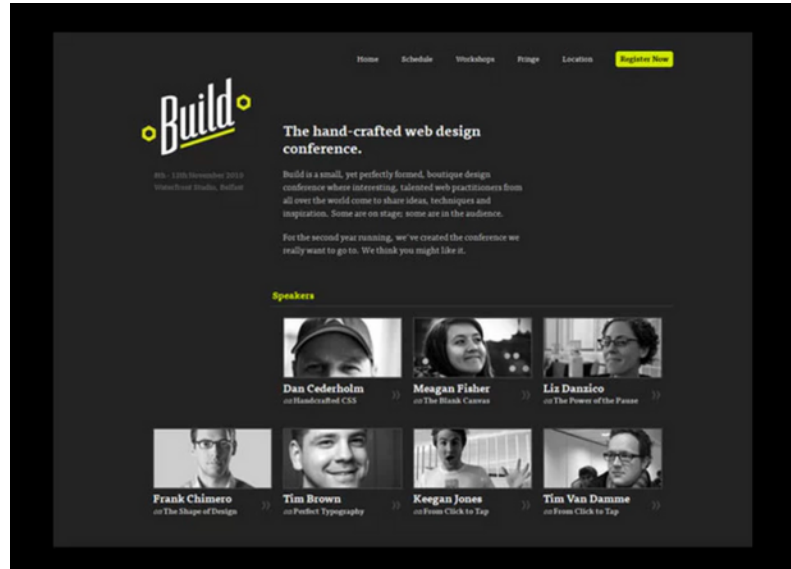


Similar to how content in books and newspapers are arranged; your website should reflect the same structure. "Responsive Design" - designs that seamlessly translate to mobile devices - is what drives the need to maintain a grid structure. In many industries more than 80% of websites are accessed using a mobile device (restaurants are among the most common).

Tip: think mobile as you layout and design your website.

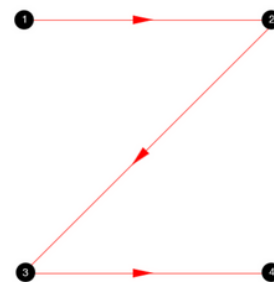
4.2

VISUAL HIERARCHY



Most cultures read left to right and yet we have a tendency to "scan" much more than "read" pages. Good web pages are built around a rule that follows our natural instincts to examining a web page; also known as the Z Rule. This rule indicates that your design layout should follow a Z pattern.

Z Rule



Tip: reference this layout frequently throughout your design process.

4.3

WEB-SAFE FONTS

Cabin & Old Standard TT

All of this text is editable. Simply click anywhere in the paragraph or heading text and start typing. You can copy and paste your own content in to see what it looks like with these font combinations.

Heading: Cabin

Body: Old Standard TT

Unlike years ago, today there are hundreds of terrific web-safe fonts to choose from. Most website builders have a good variety to choose from or make it easy to upload your own. Google Fonts is a terrific resource for finding the perfect font for your website.

Google Fonts

(right click and open in new tab)

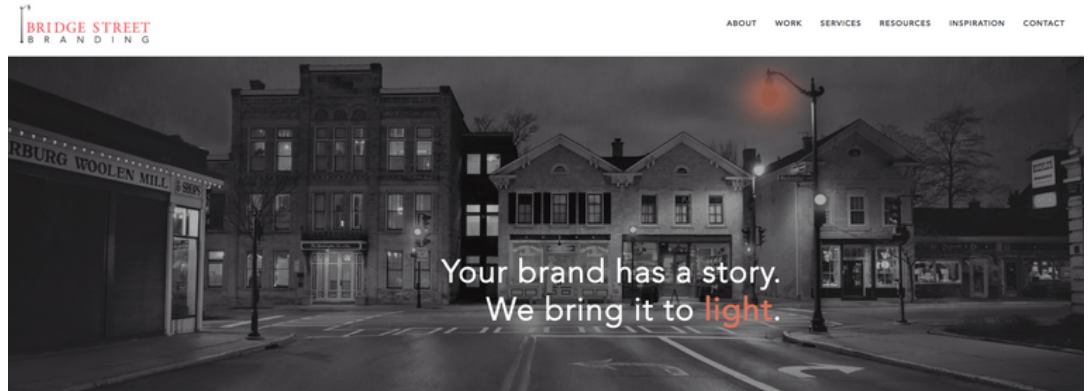
With that in mind, here are a couple rules to follow:

- Serif fonts for headlines
Serif fonts make for good header copy since in smaller sizes they become a bit more difficult to read.
- Keep fonts to a minimum
Limit your selection to one for main headings (H1, H2); another for tertiary headings (H3) and one more for body copy.

Tip: if you have a logo try and select a font that compliments your logo design and font combination

4.4

IMAGES & COLORS



Bridge Street Branding is elegant and distinctive, the use of color creates intrigue and compliments their brand.

Basic color and image principles are not unique to web design...keep your selection of image and colors to a minimum.

A word on colors:

- Keep your color palette minimal
Stick to 2 or 3 colors. These should compliment your brand and be used to highlight areas of importance.

A word on images:

- Choose thoughtfully
Don't use images just to fill in space. Use images that help communicate your message.
- Keep files sizes small
High-quality images are large files. Compress them into web friendly sizes, otherwise they will slow your site down considerably.

Tip: invest in a image compression app; they only cost a few bucks and will provide you the best outputs.

5 seo

The following will get you well on your way to improving your website's ranking.

5.1

SEO

It seems that every business wants to be the top listing in their area when searched online. Reality is that achieve that ranking takes a lot of time and money - much of which small businesses cannot absorb. But don't fret, we are going to cover some of the basics to get you on your way to improving your ranking.

1) Mobile-First

75-85% of people that own a smartphone use a search engine at least once a day. In response to this usage Google has penalized websites that are not mobile-friendly by lower them in search rankings or eliminating them altogether.

2) Know Your Keywords

Do you know what terms your customers use to search for businesses like yours? If not, its time you do a bit of research and identify the keywords that are most meaningful for your industry. You can start by using Google's Keyword Planner - this planner will give you a good sense of what keywords you should be featuring on your site.

Example: If your electrician that likes to only serve Northern Illinois. Key phrases such as "Northern Illinois Electrician is more relevant than "Illinois Electrician"

3) Optimize Your Website

Your site needs to feature the keywords pertinent to your business. Start by creating unique page titles, meta descriptions for each image used, page URL's, and content that references these keywords.

Example: If you are an electrician that serves Northern Illinois, use a keyword phrase like "Northern Illinois Electrician" as your page title.

5.1

SEO cont.

4) Local SEO with Google Business

We cannot stress this enough. You must register your business with Google if you want any chance of improving your ranking. By registering, your business will appear in search results for local keyword searches.

Google Business

(right click and open in new tab)

5) Blog

Every new blog post creates a new opportunity to be found by search engines.

Example: A post titled "Northern Illinois Electrician Review with Customer Testimonials" is a great way to show off your business and develop trust.

6) Register Your Website with Google Search Console

This step is among the most important to ensure your website is registered with Google, which helps to increase your website's visibility and it also provided the added benefits of tracking keywords used to find your website.

Google Search Console

(right click and open in new tab)

7) Get Those Reviews

Google loves reviews. Use your Google Business listing as your repository to collect reviews of your business. Frequency, quantity, and quality of the reviews are essential. And no, do not attempt to have friends and family review your business - Google is onto this and has developed sophisticated algorithms to catch these deceptive businesses.

Tip: be sure to include your sitemap when you register your website site with Google's Search Console

SEO checklist

☐ 1) Website Settings

- ☐ Write SEO description
- ☐ Format titles
- ☐ Turn on AMP
- ☐ Turn on SSL
- ☐ Connect social media accounts
- ☐ Turn on 'share' buttons
- ☐ Update your business information

☐ 2) Keywords

- ☐ Research keywords
- ☐ Optimize your website title
- ☐ Differentiate navigation & page titles
- ☐ Write page descriptions
- ☐ Remove 'dates' from blog post URL
- ☐ Keep page and blog post URL short
- ☐ Use keywords in H1, H2 & H3
- ☐ Add ALT-TEXT to your images
- ☐ Use Tags & Categories

☐ 3) Housekeeping

- ☐ Clean up your Not Linked section
- ☐ 301 Redirect old URL's
- ☐ Create a custom 404 page

☐ 4) Google & Bing

- ☐ Verify site with Google
- ☐ Submit sitemap to Google
- ☐ Verify site with Bing
- ☐ Add Google Analytics ID to website
- ☐ Get listed with Google My Business

☐ 5) Write

- ☐ Blog regularly
- ☐ Get inbound links
- ☐ Engage with your audience

Results don't happen overnight. Be patient and be diligent in following this checklist. Most importantly don't buy into the many self-proclaimed SEO experts - getting ranked takes time and a lot of work - claims for a quick fix simply are empty promises.

6

launching your site

Before you go live your site needs to be ready for primetime.

6.1

FINAL CHECKLIST

- Have your images been optimized (compressed)?
- Did you run-test the site to measure its performance?
- Did you set up your page-specific keywords?
- Did you add your site and sitemap to Google Search Console?
- Is your entire site secure (HTTPS)?
- Did you spell-check your site?
- Are your contact details correct?
- Have you checked all your site links?
- Did you create a Favicon/Brand icon.
- Did you create a custom 404 page.
- Did you test your site on mobile devices?
- Are all your social media accounts connected to your site?
- Do you have a repository to collect your visitor's information?

Here is a great tool to test your site:

Hubspot Website Grader

(right click and open in new tab)

parting words

We hope that this guide was helpful and provides you the information and resources needed to get your web design project off the ground. Even if you decide to hire someone to design your site - this guide should be seen as a useful tool to get you acquainted with the process and some best practices involving website design.

With a little time and patience, you can design a site that you can be proud of and one that engages your visitors.

As always, we are here to assist in the event you have any questions.

Thanks,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'RRMS' with a stylized flourish at the end.

Remig

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