***A first-timers shot at making a professional wordpress site***

**Why I’m writing this thing and talking about design:**

* Its unavoidable- any project you want to do in any situation will call upon your ability to organize and design information
* I didn’t really think about that when I took the wordpress project- just heard ‘9k’and went with it and figured I’d learn as I go. But it was way more complicated than that
* I got off easy because he wanted to keep the basics of the site the same, which stopped me from having to reinvent the wheel
* Still, when someone is saying, ‘make this better’ it’s hard to stop your mind from running rampant with all the cool things you’d like to do, as if you were a professional artist
* Then you hit reality and realize how limited your understanding of these things really is, especially when you realize your finished product looks like crap.
* So I’m going to use the wordpress page I wrote as a grounding for this discussion because it demonstrates the best and worst of the learning process as it was the first website I had to make look professional.
* I had a few things going in my favor when it came to this project (in a design sense) and a few things going against me.

**Pros:**

1. The original website sucked. Everything about it sucked- organization, color scheme, all of it. I knew, no matter what that since the baseline was starting so low, anything I did to it could only be an improvement. I’ll go more into that later.
2. The client was a nice person and fairly flexible, and knew next to nothing about software which I knew would give me 100% free reign to use whatever I could figure to use, without needing to hear too many specifications from him.
3. It paid well- more in a general sense, any hours I’d need to take to learn the thing, or to learn how to design, I knew I’d be compensated reasonably for it even if I messed up repeatedly.

**Cons:**

1. I’d never made a professional, finished website before- and perhaps more importantly (which I didn’t know to distinguish at the time) I didn’t know how to make a COMMERCE site. Commerce sites require their own specific information architecture, which I did not realize until rather late in the game (and which I will touch more on later)
2. In a larger sense, and apart from design (although money fueled my ability to have the time to design) I’d never made an independent contract with someone before, and having to estimate my working hours proved a lot more difficult than I’d anticipated- almost especially when it came to the design portions of the project. I’d spend the estimated amount of time organizing the menu bar, and ten times as long deciding what the menu bar should look like (at least initially.) I’ll have a section in this essay discussion some of the things I learned in negotiating my salary, even despite the fact that the client in this case was very easy going.
3. I had no idea of the range of tools available to make this kind of site- I’d made react websites before and some python/flask websites and sort of knew that those kinds of ground-up everything-from-scratch-type deals could take many hours. I sort of knew that most websites of the kind Dan needed were made using content management systems like wordpress or drupal, and I knew I’d probably need to learn about these and choose one and implement that. What I failed to research adequately, however, was simply the range of choice even within each of those in terms of plugins and formats and styles and hosts and every other imaginable thing. There are actually content management system companies that specialize in making wordpress sites for a reason. It manages to be a highly specific and rather tricky thing even though it also finds its value in letting “anyone” make a website. I will discuss this more in-depth later on.

**Chapter 1. get the low-hanging fruit (worry about the rest later)**

I’ll skip the part where I talk about how I landed a deal to make a fairly straightforward wordpress site for what ended up being almost 10k when I’d never made a website for someone for money (let alone a wordpress site) before. Somehow we fell to talking about his abysmal website in regards to SEO. He’d gotten a google analytics reading from his previous web guy that said people just weren’t hitting his site as much as his competitors. He’d searched his own site and realized to his dismay that ‘scottish lace” was coming up way far ahead of his own ‘cooper lace’ when in fact he netted more sales etc. He knew his SEO needed big improvement and asked me about how it would be done. I took a look at his site and gave him an honest answer- that its current organization made it unsearchable because it was more or less unusable (organizationally, and even visually speaking.) I told him correcting his SEO issues would take more than a band-aid, it would require a brand new site altogether. I never really offered my services in this regard, as I still felt a bit timid of the idea, but I Suppose he assumed that since I’m familiar with one side of it I knew how to do it all. Interesting how people make these assumptions when it comes to tech. So Dan felt my face looked smart or something, made that judgment call on his own and started asking me how much a website would cost. I was honest and started thinking about the react websites I’d known people to make for larger companies when I estimated it at 40k. I told him a friend might do it for less. So when we decided I’d do his project for about 9k I think he saw it as a steal and I, to be totally honest, had no idea if I was conning the life out of this man or if in actuality my services would be worth that much. I knew I would put in my best efforts, though, and after having looked at the original website I was fairly confident that I could jump right in to making some information architecture improvements right off the bat that would increase sales.

**the former website (information architecture issues):**

I’ll give some examples of ‘low-hanging fruit’ as I first identified it the day he asked me to remake his website. Some issues I noted immediately that made me feel confident I could tackle the project/improve sales included the following (with the first being the most important)

**-menu issues**

(as Jessica mentioned in her ux article, if you make menus you make peoples choices for you. His original website essentially did not provide people to make purchases. It brought x, y, and z to z,y and x. I knew a simple google analytics search would reveal even more issues than I’d originally imagined, and I was right- hit rates at x, y and z were at x percent because of x. it was very apparent that people were not able to travel from point A to point B of this website. All of this led to:

**- Usability issues**

-layering issues

Things were very funkily laid out and even my own novice eyes could see it right away. The urls were x. the layering was x. google analytics confirmed lots of duplicates and things that would be bad for seo.

**-hosting issues**

Mike was using what? And why did it suck? He just didn’t have the skills to maintain the thing

**Seal the deal**

I tried to outline everything as I thought I should, and as everyone always says one should by making a ‘rock solid’ contract. Aka, I found one online that had several pages and used big words and seemed to cover that gray area between, extra stuff the client may want done that maybe, should be done and yet that could take up more of my time. Attributed hours to dollars so he would feel more secure about where his thousands were going and would have a piece of paper to caress and comfort himself with as he sent out the money order. Sent it to him to sign and all went smoothly.

**Find someone to help because you realize it will be too much work**

* part of any successful venture is admitting when you may need help. I was happy to employ a very skilled friend of mine to help with some of the technical issues I knew I’d encounter/would not have time to deal with and my instincts were correct in this choice, and nate has been instrumental /critica in the project getting finished in regards to some of the backend, SEO and data-entry issues we encountered.

**Chapter 2. get started**

… now comes they sucky part. We’ve been paid and need to lay out the thing. Organization was easy- but the look and feel of it? That’s when I realized I had no clue and Nate had even less of a clue. To be safe, decided to stick to the old layout/color because he hadn’t expressly said he disliked it- more that he wanted people to actually be able to ARRIVE to his site. Those are two different issues. So we went with the same color scheme and made our first mistake in choosing a fairly customizable template for wordpress, so we could make a site that essentially looked like his last one except with an organization that would allow people to travel his site and find the place to pay.

IMAGES.

We finished this and were quite proud of ourselves for a second until we realized that this version of the website, even though it had a more modern organization and backend, didn’t hold up to modern-day commerce sites in the least. It still resembled the old shitty website because I’d been too afraid to stray from the original design. Feeling more confident and more familier with the tools available, at this point we decided to start trying to get creative and modernize the look and feel of the site so that Dan would really feel like his 9k was being put to good use, and buying him a snazzy new site, rather than something that looked exactly as it did before. So in a way, designing came about to sooth our client’s sensibilities rather than from an express request that it look different because, he actually had no idea what a modern-day site should look like, either.

IMAGES

You can see the iterations we went through, each one more excruciating to make than the last. Nothing like spending 40 hours on a layout only to hear that Dan didn’t like it for one reason or another.

IMAGES

It was about this time we realized we were doing something seriously and critically wrong. We were working with a plugin that was too simplistic to serve our purposes. We’d wanted to go with something highly customizable but in doing so we made it so everything needed to be custom made. I’d expressly wanted to avoid the ‘cookie cutter’ look of most wordpress sites, and so thought this was the best solution but was wrong. We ended up needing to change to flatley and redoing the site, essentially, using something that would do a lot of x, y, and z for us. It was a hard choice- to re-do or not to re-do? But ultimately the responsible choice to make as we considered other factors such as (the cart, etc etc, future work to be had if we still had to customize as we’d done for the homepage, every other page)

**DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FLATELY AND THE OLD SITE**

**Chapter 3. getting serious about design (or at least trying to)**

So we got all excited about this new plugin that was fancy and was not free and actually cost about 100 dollars- so we decided to go with something more modern and at this point, and at the urging of our teacher, started taking UX design and getting a sleeker more modern look , more seriously. Jim suggested we look at sites like indochino and we also started more seriously evaluating what other websites had done and what we liked and didn’t like about their choices.

IMAGES/COMPARISONS/DISCUSSIONS

**Research**

It’s at this time we made an effort to involve more academic sources in our pursuits as we desperately tried to become design experts (or rather, as I tried to become a design expert because nate is essentially colorblind and couldn’t care less). Looked at

SOURCES

And learned

ETC.

And all of this helped in designing

IMAGES.

**Chapter 4**. knocked down again, for a factor we’d forgotten

Dan saw the more modern design we’d accomplished and surprisingly virulently wanted the homepage to look like X because, as he’d mentioned before (but we hadn’t strongly considered) his website had a particular audience. That is, old ladies order curtains and so a sleek modern website would be lost on them- in his mind they wanted to see everything laid out in their face, all of the category options, rather than even needing to know how to scroll down the page to search for this. In that sense, our website couldn’t look like the ‘ideal’ website or even look so modern, it needed to cater to an older audience that may not know how to traverse a modern-day site.

We reverted it back to this layout that called upon some elements of the original website

OLDER WEBSITE W PICTURES IN FACE

ORIGIONAL WEBSITE HOMEPAGE W PICTURES IN FACE

And finally he was happy with this.

**Chapter 5. paid again, and the next nightmarish part of the website.**

So this part was actually making sure the thing looked perfect which meant a lot of hours of tweaking and also, product entry which was an excruciating process. For a content management ‘system’ wordpress sure required a lot of ‘manual’ managing, as we found out.