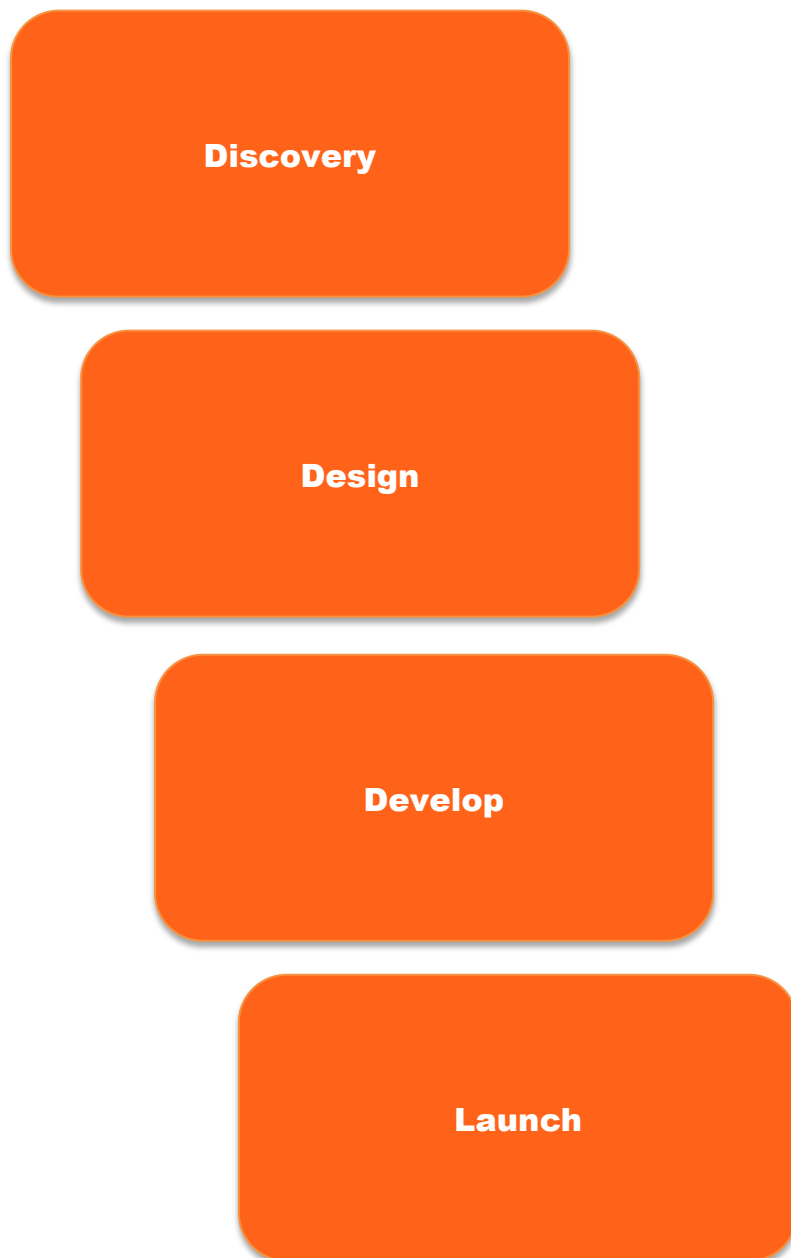


Story of a Website: The Process of Developing a Website



The Website Development Process

What can you expect when you hire a vendor to develop your website? Every vendor is different, as is every project. However, though terminology and the details may vary, the process is roughly the same for all design firms.



Types of Agencies

Website development agencies generally come in two varieties:

- Brand and visual design agencies
- User experience design agencies

Brand and visual design These agencies are often brand marketing or brand design firms. They are especially concerned with graphics, logos, colors, fonts, brand messaging, and making sure the website is visually stunning and consistent with your marketing message. Designers in this category generally have a visual design background.

User experience design These agencies are focused on understanding the website visitors and their needs, as well as the business needs, to design a website that looks good and functions well. They are focused on the sitemap, navigation, website forms, and other elements that the user interacts with on your website. Designers in this category generally have a background in usability or information architecture.

Both visual and user experience design are important. A good vendor considers and addresses all aspects of a website. Be aware, though, that vendors tend to lean one way or another.



Discovery

Where we ask you a lot of questions

In the discovery phase, the agency asks a lot of questions to understand your website requirements. In discovery, we assess your:

- **Business and environment**—What is your business? Who are your customers? Who are your competitors? What differentiates you? What does your sales funnel look like?
- **Business goals**— What issues do you face? Why are you creating the website? What is your business strategy?
- **Website goals**—How does the website fit into your digital strategy (social media, advertising, etc.)? How do you hope it will help your bottom line?
- **User goals**—What do users want from your website? Why do they come to it? Where does it fail them?
- **User traits**—Who are your users? What are their demographics? What do they know about your business? Do they access via mobile devices?
- **Business processes, etc.**—How does your business work? Who does IT, and what internal tools do you use? Who will update and maintain the website? What approvals or workflows are required?

How and who

Discovery is conducted as a series of meetings, usually from one to four meetings. Attendees on the vendor side: Information Architect/Designer, branding person, project manager. Attendees on the client side: the website owner(s), stakeholders whose website goals must be met, sales or service personnel who understand the users and the business, IT personnel familiar with the technical environment and requirements.

Outcome

The result of Discovery is a clear and detailed understanding of the website requirements. Deliverables can include:

- **Personas**—Biographies of fictional website users, with detailed information. Personas are used to ensure the website is designed with real people in mind and built to meet their needs.
- **Requirements and scope document**—The specific requirements for the website. It documents any assumptions being made and any constraints on the project, technical or otherwise.

Tips and Information

Discovery starts in the initial conversations between client and vendor—before you've even hired the vendor. When picking a vendor, consider the quality of the questions being asked in these early stages.

Check your assumptions A good discovery process is likely to challenge assumptions. You may find you know less about your customers than you thought, and less about how they use your website. The process may uncover significant differences of opinion within your organization about business and website goals. Discovery can benefit a business well beyond the website work itself.

User research is an option Sometimes, the discovery process reveals a need to do more research about customers and how they use the website or their needs. This can be done by the client or the agency. There are many ways to do research, from reviewing analytics data for the site, to conducting surveys or focus groups, to observation. User research can be scaled to be cost effective.

Creating a new website requires a partnership. You don't just hire a vendor, toss your website requirements over the wall, and await delivery. Creating an effective website requires a partnership between the client and the vendor, with give and take and ongoing discussions. Expect to invest a fair amount of your time.

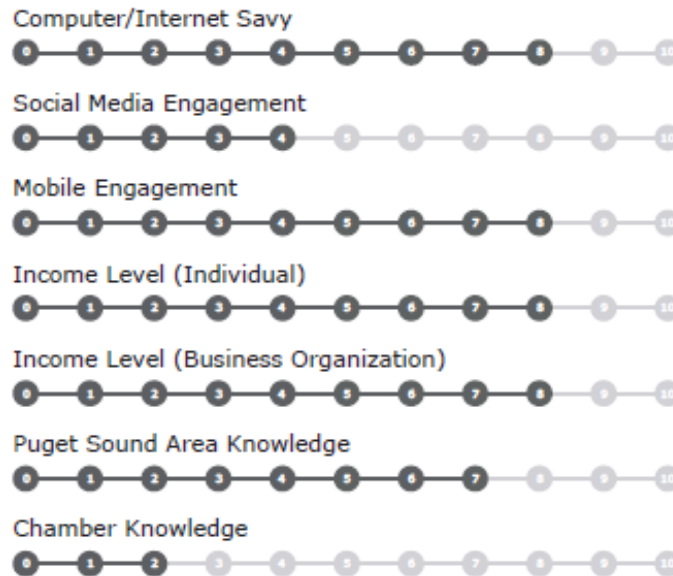


Large Business (Non-Member)

Scott Brown



- Age 48
- Lives in Bellevue, WA
- CEO for game developer/publisher



“PERSONAS ARE USED TO ENSURE THE WEBSITE IS DESIGNED WITH REAL PEOPLE IN MIND AND BUILT TO MEET THEIR NEEDS...”

Background

Scott is the CEO of an extremely successful game company. The company that he works for was started by young entrepreneurs taking advantage of the dot com boom. They did things in an unconventional way in terms of business practices simply because they were unaware of how things were traditionally done. Their company has grown to a large size and continues to generate a high level of income. Scott is trying to make changes to the way the company operates to ensure their continued success. Scott was recently cold-called by a member of the GSCC sales team, and he is now considering the benefits of joining Chamber.

Social Media & Mobile Profile

Scott has a Facebook account, which he uses primarily to post photos of his kids. He also checks on what his friends and family are doing, when time permits. That isn't often, though. He has a long-neglected LinkedIn account and doesn't think much of Twitter. He does watch YouTube videos for entertainment, but doesn't post any. Scott lives and dies by his mobile phone. He has an iPhone which he uses constantly to communicate with coworkers, family, friends, etc. He is often traveling or driving to meetings and uses the GPS, applications, and websites to book tickets, find locations, etc.

Design

Where we look at a lot of pictures

In the Design phase, we take what we've learned and create the blueprint for your website. The design phase is fun and exciting for the client and the vendor. It's an iterative process where we present designs, discuss them with you, possibly test them with customers, and then refine the design.

During the design phase, you will see:

- **Sitemaps**—Diagrams that show the pages in the website and convey the main navigation routes to them.
- **Wireframes**—Drawings that show the elements that will appear on each page of the website and describe how they operate at a high level.
- **Comps**—Illustrations showing how the website pages will actually look. These images show the colors, fonts, sizing, and layout of elements on the page.

Wireframes are done for all the key pages on a website, though not necessarily every page. Comps are created for one to four pages—enough to show how each unique element will be styled.

How and who

Design is conducted as a series of meetings or rounds, where sets of wireframes or comps are reviewed. If necessary, the client may choose to do an internal review with a larger group of stakeholders to collect their feedback. Attendees on the vendor side are the same as in the Discovery phase. On the client side, the website owners attend all meetings and others attend those meetings where their input is needed.

Outcome

The outcome is a complete website design, with wireframes, a sitemap, and comps that can be used to develop a website style sheet (CSS). At this point, the team will also have made other decisions, such as whether to use a Content Management System (CMS) and which one to use, what platform to build on (PHP, .NET, etc.), and so on.

What is a CMS?

A CMS is a Content Management System.

In the early days of websites, every page in every website was built, one by one. Any time you had to make a change to a page on the website, a technical person had to make it—even if it was as simple as fixing a typo.

WYSIWYG

Over time, companies created systems that made it easier to change the text and pictures on a website, while protecting the HTML and other code that only programmers understood. They used editors that let users see the text and make changes similar to using a word processor. These were early CMS or content management systems. For many people today, this is all the features they need in a CMS.

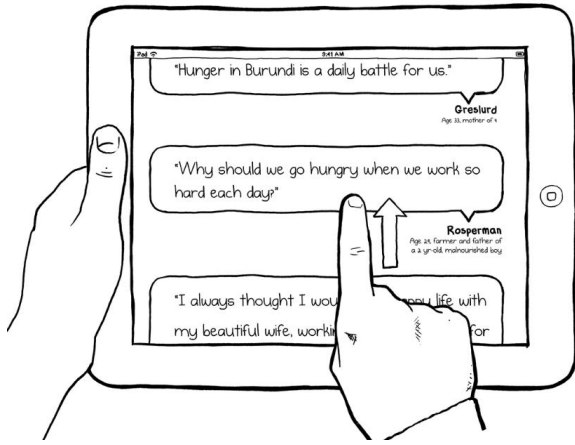
Dynamic pages

As websites grew more complex, developers began creating websites whose pages were populated automatically from data in a database. The pages all looked the same, except for the details.

Think about real estate sites that use the MLS (Multiple Listing Service). Each page shows information for an individual house. The pages all look the same, but the information is different, specific to each house. The page is actually created once as a template inside a CMS. The data about each house is stored in the CMS, and the CMS creates each listing page on-the-fly, when a user wants to see it. These are called dynamic pages.

Content Management Systems Today

Today, there are literally hundreds of systems. They range in price from free systems (even very good ones) to ones costing tens of thousands. They are used to manage large, complex websites with hundreds or thousands of dynamic pages—to small sites with only five pages. If you need a CMS, there is almost certainly one out there to meet your requirements.

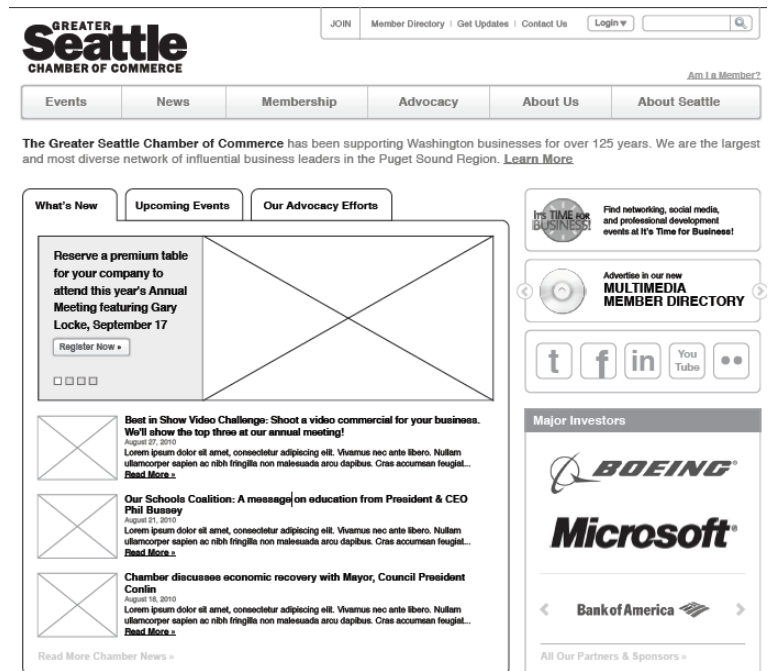


WIREFRAMES CAN LOOK ALMOST HAND-DRAWN.

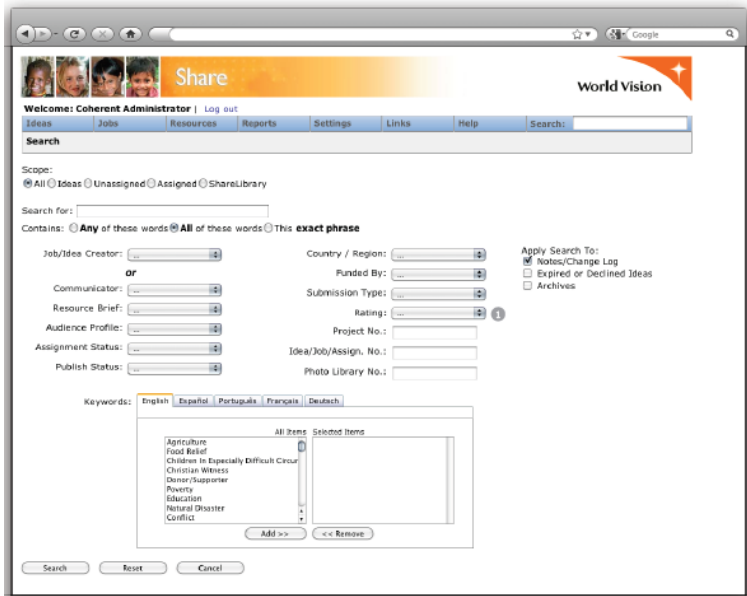
ROUGH SKETCHES HELP TO FOCUS ON WHAT THE WEBSITE DOES RATHER THAN HOW IT LOOKS

WIREFRAMES SHOW ALL THE ELEMENTS THAT WILL APPEAR ON THE PAGE.

THEY CAN BE VERY COMPLEX, AND REQUIRE CAREFUL REVIEW AND DISCUSSION.



Scope: All



Develop

Where we work magic

Now that we've got the blueprint, it's time to build!

The client is not as involved during the development stage. Instead, the developers work to build the site according to the wireframes, comps, and sitemap. Internally, this stage can be divided into five phases:

- **Specification**—Before development begins, the project manager or IA will write a specification. That's a document that describes, in detail, how the website will work and what should happen on every page, for every action the user might take on that page. Generally, the client reviews and approves the specification before work begins.
- **Infrastructure**—Similar to preparing the foundation for a building, the developers must create the basic infrastructure for your website. This might include setting up the CMS, preparing the development and test environments, and creating the basic page structure (the navigation menu, footer, etc.).
- **Back-end coding**—The back-end developer creates all the website pages, puts all the buttons and content boxes on the page, places headings, and so on. This developer creates any databases necessary and writes the code to create dynamic pages, automatically send notification emails, and do any other complex tasks.
- **Front-end coding**—The front-end developer takes the pages the back-end coder has created and makes them beautiful. Using the specification, wireframes, and comps, he or she applies CSS styles to make the fonts the right size, position the graphics and other items on the screen, apply the correct colors, etc.
- **Testing**—Testing is actually an ongoing process. Each developer tests his or her work as it's completed. However, toward the end of the project, others will test the website in a methodical way, to make sure it works as specified. The client is often also involved in doing "ad-hoc" testing, by using the website and reporting any errors.

How is the client involved?

Different vendors have different processes for managing their projects and reporting progress. During the Discovery and Design phase, the client is fully involved, so progress is apparent. During Development, this changes.

At Coherent Interactive, we use cloud-based tools that give our customers access to information. We also have weekly status reports or meetings. Some questions to ask your potential vendor:

- **How can you view project progress?** Will the vendor provide Gantt charts or other progress reports? Will you be able to log into a system to review progress at any time?
- **Do you have a document repository?** Does your vendor use Basecamp or another shared space to store the wireframes, specifications, and so on? Will you have access to the repository and will you and they be able to maintain a history of discussions and decisions?
- **Do you have a public bug-tracking system?** Developers usually have a list of work items that they need to complete to create the website. Testers report bugs (problems) they find in the website so that developers can fix them. Is the system public so that your staff can easily report bugs and discuss them online?

A warning: The website design provides a blueprint, but just as with construction, you may have to revise the blueprint during building. Sometimes technical issues or limitations are uncovered. Other times, as the site is implemented, you uncover new requirements. Be flexible and remember this is a partnership.

What about SEO?

Too often, search engine optimization is an afterthought. People hire an SEO consultant to optimize their website for search engine rankings after the site is built. Although much can be done to improve rankings at that point, you'll get better results if you think about SEO in the Discovery and Design phases.

SEO doesn't exist in a vacuum. You want:

- **Search engines to be aware of your website.** To appear in search results and have a chance of ranking high, your website has to have basic code and tags that allow it to be crawled effectively. It needs URLs that are human readable, meta tags, and standard coding so there are no barriers for the search engines. It needs analytics code added so you can measure and optimize SEO. ***Standards-based, quality coding*** ensures this.
- **The right people to find your website.** This might be target customers, it might be several different customer segments, or it might be another website audience (such as bloggers or news organizations) that has access to your target customers. They each need to be able to find your site via the search terms they are likely to use. This is why ***keyword research*** is important.
- **Each audience to see the right content.** Once visitors reach your website, you need them to see the right message. On average, you have five to seven seconds to capture their attention before they click away from your website. That means that each type of visitor needs to land on a page whose text and images speaks to them and their concerns. We call these ***landing pages***.
- **Each page to drive users to take an action.** You didn't create your website for the fun of it. You had goals, specific business results. Once you get the right users to your website and capture their attention, you want them to take some action. It might be filling out a form online, printing your materials or sharing those materials with others in their organization, or picking up the phone to call you. Each page needs to provide clear ***calls to action*** to encourage those results.

To accomplish all of the above, you start with the audience definition in the Discovery phase, segment the audience, and identify their goals. Then, your SEO consultant can do keyword research to understand how people are looking for you, based on their goals. Sometimes the results are surprising and can lead to changes in the site design.

The SEO consultant and the information architect can work together at that point to define specific landing pages for each audience, design a navigation path for these customers, and put calls to action on key pages in a visible way, to get the results you want. Your SEO consultant and content specialist can then help you to develop the right text for each page to help with SEO and get visitors to stick around for longer.



Launch

Where the hard work pays off!

Once development is complete, it's usually a simple process to go live. We deploy your website to your hoster or servers, and make it available to the world.

If we've built your website on a CMS or done some custom applications for you, we'll train you in how to update and maintain the site. Like every good vendor, we are always available for questions, to fix bugs, and to address new requirements. Ideally, you're measuring the activity on your website and the results against your business goals. So you know that your hard work has paid off with real, bottom-line value.

Coherent Interactive

Coherent Interactive creates websites, mobile applications, and social media strategies for mid-size companies.

We build sites with an eye toward social interaction and always ensure your site is mobile-friendly. We create social media strategies and can build complementary mobile apps, to create a Coherent Interactive, holistic, and effective system for meeting business goals by providing customer value.

We build what you need:

Websites—That effectively meet your business goals and your users' needs

Mobile apps—To expand your business and improve your bottom line

Social media strategies—To reach and engage your customers in ways that help your business

Ecommerce sites—That make it easy to find products and complete a purchase



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