12 Signs Your Website Is Past Its Prime

A guide for small business owners who want to put their best foot forward

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MARKET LIKE YOU MEAN IT

How do you know if your website is helping or hurting your business?

It's a fact of doing business in 2016 that you *have* to have a website – right? Of course it is. But are all websites created equal? If your site is out of date or not doing its job, it's possible it could be doing as much harm as good for your business. The big question is this: How do you know? When should you start to question your site's effectiveness?

How Does Your Site Reflect on Your Business?

Today's Internet users are savvy – nearly as savvy as the designers tasked with creating online experiences. So if your site is falling flat, you can rest assured it's not going unnoticed. There was a time when saying you simply *had* a site was enough – but that time was many years ago. Today, a site should communicate your brand values. It should tell your story. It should show off your goods. And more than anything, it should spur your customers to *do something* – to take action.

Can Your Site Actually Hurt You?

The short answer: Yes. Many local businesses rely on word-of-mouth marketing – they do good business with their regulars, and what more do they need? But this ignores a number of factors. As children grow into adults with purchasing power, they have distinct expectations of the online experience. Tourists rely on the Internet to let them know about amazing new things to see and do. And even geographical relocation is a huge factor – when new people move to your area, how do they know how to find you and not your competitor?

Over the next 12 pages, we'll take a look at some ways your site may be falling flat, as well as ways you can reinvigorate your business online.

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1. Your site's not mobile-friendly.

As a designer, even *I* didn't believe it when mobile began to overtake desktop surfing. And yet it happened – and it happened with vigor. In 2014, there were murmurs that it was on the way – and in May 2015, Google finally, officially put out the word. Mobile was king, and they had the stats to prove it. Some industries are more prone to mobile exploration than others, but even my clients in areas like book publishing are reporting that 60% of their users are now accessing their content via mobile.

There are two reasons this is a big deal for your business. The first is simple user experience. Knowing that more people are accessing your site on a mobile device, don't you think you should make it as easy as possible for them to actually read that information? Old-school sites tend to involve miniscule text and insane amounts of pinching and zooming. That stopped being novel and fun a long, long time ago.

The second, and equally important, reason is this: Google. In April 2015, Google implemented something commonly referred to as "Mobilegeddon." Simply put, they started penalizing sites that weren't mobile-friendly in search ranking. Some stats report that non-mobile sites lost as much as 47% of their mobile search ranking. And guess what? Mobilegeddon 2 is coming in May 2016. The message is pretty clear: Get on board, or Google is eventually going to disappear you altogether.

2. You've run out of space on your homepage.

There's this funny thing that happens with websites. They start out all shiny and perfect, with a place for everything and everything in its place. And then you realize that you need a *tiny* little promotional spot for that sale you have every other month. Then seven new social networks are invented, and you have no place to put them on your perfect homepage. Then you get some great reviews on TripAdvisor, and you want to put their widget on your homepage, front and center where everyone can see it. Then you start a monthly gathering of the coolest people you know, and you realize that you also need an events calendar wedged in there somewhere. Then you redesign your logo, and it doesn't quite fit in the spot that it used to. And so on and so forth. Before you know it, your homepage – this beautiful, perfect snapshot of a beautiful, perfect moment in your business – looks like a cobbled-together mess created by a five-year-old.

This is actually a very normal and organic part of the lifespan of any website. A website is a living organism – it's *meant* to evolve and grow over time. But that does mean that you can't just put it out into the world and expect that it will always stay exactly the way it is. Technological gadgets change. Social media fads change. The cool new review sites change. Your branding changes. When your homepage looks like a disorganized hodgepodge, it's time to think about a redesign. Don't worry. This is all part of the cycle of online life.
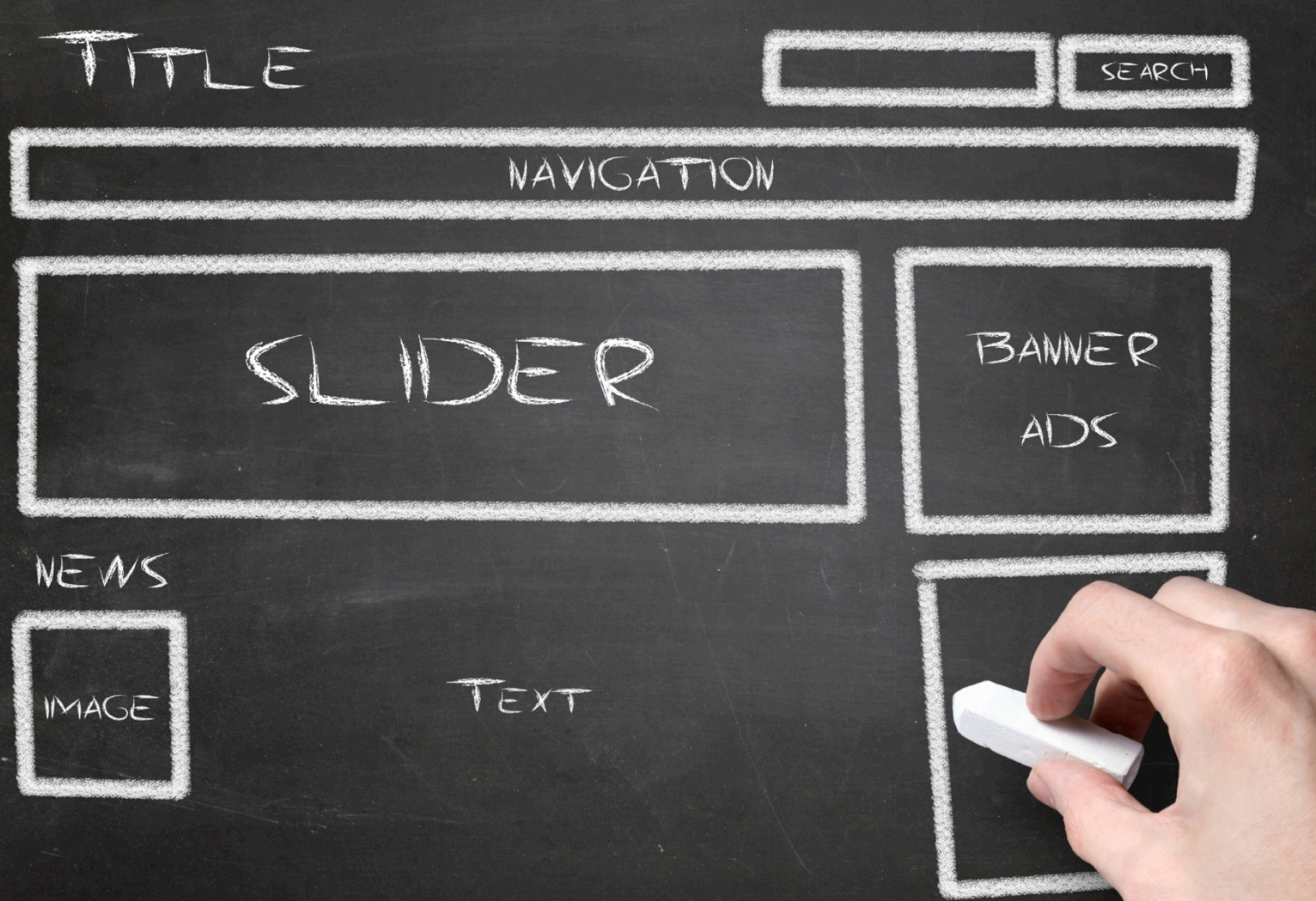
3. Your design and/or branding is out of date.

To some degree, design is subjective, right? Well, *maybe*. As we discussed earlier, today's web users are *extremely* savvy. They know when a site looks dated the same way they know you shouldn't be wearing those mom jeans. (Or that this year, you actually should be…) Maybe you're asking yourself: Why do I care? I have a site! It has information on it! So ask yourself – do you want to have the mom jeans of the website world?

There's a game I like to play when I'm doing research: "Guess Which Year This Site Was Designed?" There's one design I like to call "tiny dancer" – it's basically a very small box centered in the middle of a giant field of solid color. In 2005, when this design was popular, it made sense – monitors were smaller and it filled most of the screen. Now it's like a postage-stamp site. Patterned backgrounds are another big tell – these have been popular a few times over the years, but to be on the safe side, 1997 is always a good guess. Set-width sites (sites with gutters on both sides of the content) are more recent – let's say 2011 – but they're still a pretty clear sign that a site was probably designed pre-mobile.

Then there's the issue of branding. Has your business's branding changed substantially since your site was designed? Has your logo changed? Have your color palette or fonts evolved over time? If you own a brick-and-mortar store, have you redecorated? If your site no longer looks like your business – it's time to think about an upgrade.

4. Your site looks like everybody else's site.

When Content Management Systems (CMS) came into use around 2005, there was an adjustment period for web designers, who had been hand-coding sites with HTML up to that point. Many felt they were being forced into "little boxes" after the more freeform, artistic process they were used to. Before CMS, every page was built individually – after CMS, pages could be templated, and far more intricate sites could be built more easily than ever before. WordPress is one CMS you may be familiar with – 38% of sites that use CMS are built with WordPress, and it's by far the most common for small businesses.

The situation has been both a curse and a blessing. On the plus side, CMS systems and themes have allowed less experienced designers to enter the field and create professional-looking sites very easily. On the downside, the number of themes built to cater to this market – and to consumers who want to DIY their own sites – has exploded, and many lack the artistry of earlier design. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. Standardization of features has made surfing the web simpler in many ways. Then again, it's also led to an explosion in lookalike sites.

The important thing to understand is that using a CMS (which is a really smart thing to do!) does *not* mean you have to have a boring, templated site. If you feel like your site looks just like everyone else's, start looking for a designer who can build you a beautiful, custom-designed site using a CMS like WordPress. You can have the best of both worlds.

5. Your site is poorly architected and hard to use.

It might be that you've hired an inexpensive (which almost always means "inexperienced") designer, or it might be that you decided to give web design a shot and make your own site. While I would never discourage someone from trying their hand at web design, there's actually quite a bit more that goes into it than arranging pretty pictures on a page. You have to make sure the site navigation is sensible, consistent, and easy to use. You have to ensure that the goals for the site have been defined *and* that they're actually being met. You have to make sure the site truly reflects the brand, personality and overall quality of the business – which may be regal, funky, down-home, or some mix of all those things. You have to make sure the page elements are arranged so that the eye will naturally go where you want it to. That the font sizes are hierarchical, so that the flow of information makes sense. That the copy is written so that it's easy to digest within a five-second glance. And yes – you have to make sure it's all actually *attractive*.

Ignore any of these things, and you'll end up with a site that makes about as much sense as a horse wearing roller skates. (I know, you were totally wondering where I was going with this one.) Not sure if your site meets these criteria? Make a list of 10 things you want people to be able to do on your site. Sit someone down who's never used your site before, and ask them to do all those things. If they falter, you might need to consider restructuring your site so it's easier to use.

6. You haven't updated your content in ages.

We've already discussed the idea that a website is a living document – it's not *Moby Dick*. It's meant to change and grow and reflect online trends and the growth of your business. Your content should also change and grow. Ask yourself one question: If you wrote a whole website's worth of copy and never updated it again, why would anyone have any reason to visit your site more than once?

Content marketing is an idea that got *really* popular around 2012, and it basically means that there's enormous power in providing content on your website that your customers *really want*. Not content you think they should have, not content you *think* they want – content your customers really, really want and need. Maybe it's info about clever ways to use your products they would never think of on their own. Maybe it's how-to tutorials on things they can do or build at home. Maybe it's general industry information. In order to provide the goods, you really have to know and understand your customer.

But once you've managed to establish your site as the go-to place for information about… oh, let's say underwater basket weaving... your customers will come back again and again for all the awesome new information you're posting. They'll also consider you the world's greatest authority on this topic – and when they need to buy underwater basket weaving supplies, guess who they'll be buying them from? Bingo. Bonus? Google will reward all that traffic with better search rankings.

7. Your content is boring or hard to read.

Now that we've talked a bit about content marketing, let's talk about the nuts and bolts of writing for the web. Reading online has changed the way people consume information, and there are ways you can make it easier for your customers to digest your content. This isn't necessarily about being deadly clever and funny – although seriously, that can't hurt. It's more about the structure of your content. You're aiming for a concept called "scannability," which is a fancy word that means exactly what it sounds like. You want people to be able to scan the page and get what they need without working at it.

First of all, keep your paragraphs short. Four to five sentences is a good target. Unless you're in a specific industry with lots of dense jargon, it's also a good idea to remember that the average reading level in the U.S. is around the fourth grade. Don't get too fancy with your vocab.

If you're writing something that's, say, 300 words or longer, be sure to break up your content with subheads – aim to insert a subhead that tells readers what they're about to read every three to four paragraphs. And within your copy, whenever possible, use bullet points. Bullets (or numbered lists!) make it super easy to digest information quickly.

If your site is failing at these writing basics – it might be time to think about reworking some of your copy.

8. There's no avenue for two-way conversation on your site.

Back before social media existed (way, way back, when dinosaurs roamed the earth), many websites were referred to as "brochure sites." They were intended to provide basic information about a business, along with an address and a phone number. The term "brochure site" is still commonly used in 2016, but I would argue strenuously that it's a terrible, outdated term and it discredits exactly what has become important about the Internet: connection.

The way we use the web today is as a big crazy, multi-tentacled communications octopus. The idea of a "brochure site" is an insult. Your website is there to provide information, yes. But it's also there as a platform for communication. You want your users to read your content and share their thoughts via comments. You want them to email you, to purchase from you, to scope you out on social media, to make reservations to come see you. You want them to be curious about you. You want them to want to *know* you. If these tools aren't in place on your site, you're missing a lot of opportunities.

So if you aren't blogging – blog. And *turn the comments on*. Get to know your customers. Link them up with your social pages – either your business pages or your personal ones, if you feel comfortable with that. Have conversations. Read the reviews they leave on sites like TripAdvisor, and respond with genuine thoughts. Your site is just the body of the octopus. Make sure the tentacles reach out in every direction, and you will gain not just followers but fans.

9. Your site is not set up for conversion.

Back in the olden days, "conversion" wasn't a thing people thought about the way they do today. When the Internet first became a thing, people were really excited just to *have* a website. Most of these websites were really, really ugly. Then companies got excited about things like branding and the large-scale dissemination of information, and there were online newspapers and TV network sites and sites that pumped out tons of articles that seemed like an appealing way to "build community." But the goal was still not "conversion" – it was "monetization." In other words, selling ads, so that teams of people could be paid to make more webpages, to sell more ads. Sites got more attractive, technology made building these sites easier, and big companies continued to try and sell advertising. Normal people had sites for all sorts of interesting pursuits. (Hello, Geocities! Hi, camgirls!) Small businesses tended to have very simple sites, or no sites at all.

Things are, of course, vastly different today. Technology has leveled the playing field, and anyone can publish thousands of articles or sell thousands of products or build a world-class brand online. *Anyone* can become an Internet millionaire. The question is – what do you want people to *do* once they get to your site? Get on your newsletter list so you can talk to them again next week, or next year? Buy something? Make a reservation to eat at your restaurant? The answer to this question is all-important. So ask yourself – what are your site's goals, and are they actually being met? If not, it might be time to consider revamping your site – not to be more attractive, but to be more functional.

10. You have outdated tech and/or broken stuff on your site.

If you haven't checked in on your site in a while, you might be surprised to find there are some things that don't work quite the way you remember. At least once a year, you should go through your site and check for things that are outdated, broken, or just totally out of vogue.

Start with the informational stuff: Has your address changed? Your phone number? Your email address? Did you get married and change your name? Has your staff changed? Your pricing? All these details are important.

There are also a few nuts-and-bolts things you should check. Once or twice a year, run a link check to ensure that both the links within your own site and those to outside sites are working correctly. (Here's a tool you can use: https://validator.w3.org/checklink) Look through every page of your site, and check for outdated product information, broken images, and anything else that isn't working as it should.

Last but not least, have an honest conversation with yourself once a year to ensure you're not using outdated tech. Still have Flash on your site? Get rid of it. It's not mobile-friendly. Does your site play music? Kill it. Seventy percent of people find sites that auto-play music a "serious irritant." Keeping an eye on these details will ensure your brand stays current.
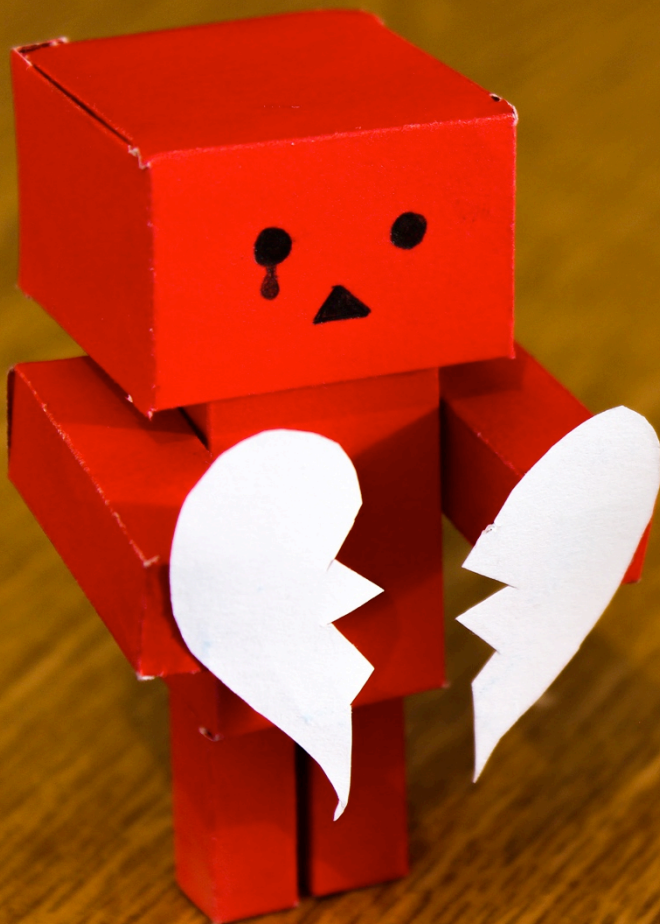
11. Your competitor's site is way, way better.

There's no way to tiptoe around this one. How does your site compare to your competitors' sites?

Surely you know who your biggest competitors are – but how often do you look at their websites? The question is more important than you might think – even if you're not looking at your competitors' sites, your customers probably are.

This really touches on almost everything we've covered so far – what actually makes a website good? It's surprising how many business owners admit that they're embarrassed by their website. Does your site reflect your brand in the way you want it to? Is it attractive? Does it *feel* like your business? Is it easy to use? Is the content engaging? Does it give people a reason to keep coming back? Does it make your business seem like a cool place to hang out? Sure, your regulars know you. But think about all the people who haven't encountered your business yet.

It's not like you have to take on every single one of your competitors. But it's a great idea to keep an eye on 3-5 of your biggest competitors and to see what they're offering that you're not. It's also a great idea to see how they rank against you in Google. Search Engine Optimization is a hugely complicated topic that we can't even begin to cover here – but if you're doing everything else right, you have a *great* shot at ranking well in Google.

12. Your website isn't a website - it's a social media page.

Can you skip the website altogether and use a social media page as your online hub? The answer to this one is complicated. Overall, it's a great idea to frequent the social channels you feel really comfortable on – as well as the ones that are critical for your specific industry. But can they take the place of a site altogether?

Ideally, no. There are several reasons for this. First of all, people are fickle and the social channel that's a big deal today could go out of vogue tomorrow. But that's not actually the biggest argument against using social as your primary online hub.

One big reason is that when you use, say, Facebook as your online hub, the primary branding people see is going to be Facebook's. And while Facebook can potentially bring you a large audience, if everyone were to abandon Facebook, you couldn't take those people with you.

So that's the other huge reason. When you have your own site, you have a critical ability we haven't talked about yet – you can build your own mailing list. Provide some incentive for your customers – let's say a coupon, if you're a hotel or a restaurant. Or a free white paper if you're corporate. In exchange, ask for their email address and promise to provide more *useful* information. The average return on email marketing is 435% - and it's free. You can't beat that.

Want more information?

We'd be happy to take a look at your site, provide a complimentary consultation, grab a cup of coffee, hang out and chat, talk about trends, whatever you're up for.

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