

THE PROFESSIONAL SERVICES WEBSITE PLANNING GUIDE

# 7 Key Steps to Creating a High Performance, Lead-Generating Website



Hinge®

**7 Key Steps to Creating a High Performance, Lead-Generating Website**  
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# Introduction

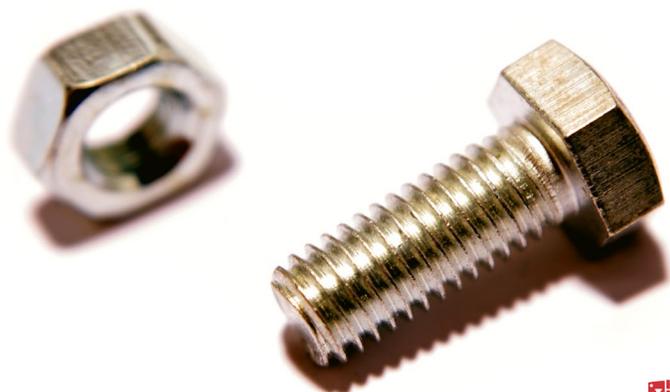
If you've ever been involved in a website launch, you know how crazy the process can become. From the first wire-frame design to the final moment of "going live," there are seemingly infinite decisions to be made and micro tasks to complete.

And as websites continue to evolve, this process will only become more complex. Firms are transforming their sites from basic digital brochures into interactive, lead-generating marketing tools.

So how do you tackle your next web project without going nuts? That's where this guide comes in. Planning for a website up front can save time, money, and a boatload of frustration, so don't jump in and hire a designer just yet.

The 7 key steps in this guide are designed to prepare you for building a website that truly performs well. By taking into consideration factors like SEO, website structure, and analytics up front, you will find yourself ahead of the game when it comes time to approve designs and go to code. Follow our advice and you will not only end up with a great, lead-generating site ... you just may maintain your sanity as well.

Enjoy!



# Evaluate Your Current Site

When planning a website redesign, it is vital to understand what is working on your current site and what is not. Before diving into new ideas, start by following these initial steps.

## Talk to Your Team

Ask the people within your organization what they like and don't like about your website. Chances are you will get mixed answers, so take them with a grain of salt. The goal is to get a feel for your site's strengths and weaknesses, and this dialogue will often uncover unexpected areas for improvement. Look for feedback on the following issues:

- > Overall look and feel
- > Imagery
- > Messaging
- > Organizational structure

Pay close attention to what the sales team has to say. They understand how to convert prospects into customers and will be helpful in transforming your site into a more effective marketing tool.

**It's important to understand how outsiders see your website.**



## Talk to Your Target Audience

Talking to your internal team alone is limiting. Research\* shows that external perceptions often differ from internal ones, and therefore it's important to understand how outsiders see your website.

The easiest audience to talk to is your current client base. Reach out to a handful of clients who are familiar with your site and ask them for feedback. Other audiences to consider include the following:

- > Former business prospects that you lost
- > Former employee prospects that you lost
- > Partners
- > Industry influencers

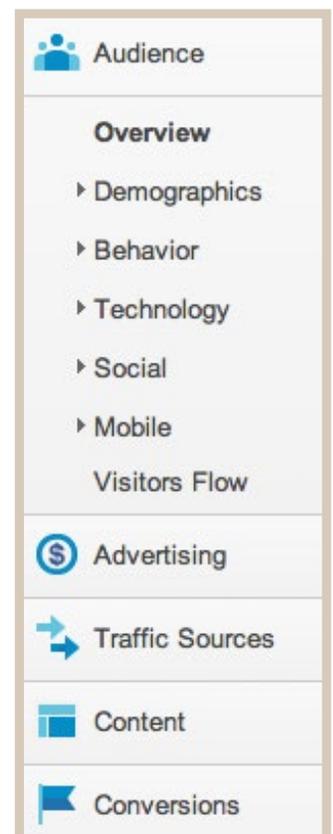
Consulting with these groups during the website planning process, along with your internal team, should help you understand which parts of your site are effective or ineffective.

## Look to Your Analytics

If you have analytics (such as Google Analytics) installed on your current website, now is a good time to do a quick evaluation. Here are three easy pieces of data that can paint a helpful picture:

1. *Traffic Sources*—Most analytics programs can list your traffic sources, including referring websites, search engines, and direct traffic. Look in particular at which specific websites are sending traffic to you.

Is more of your traffic coming from Google? If so, you will need to focus on maintaining your current search engine traffic when redesigning your site. Are you generating significant traffic from social media sites? If so, this may indicate that your redesign should be more interactive and social media friendly.

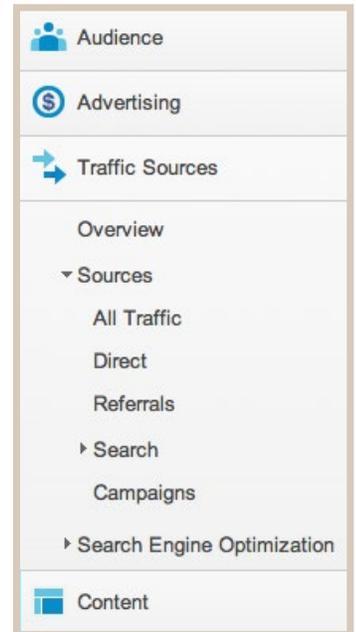


\*<http://www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/book-inside-the-buyers-brain>

2. **Keywords**—Look to see which keywords and keyword phrases are driving significant traffic to your website. A common mistake during a redesign process is to reorganize your site in a way that loses valuable search traffic.

For example, if the keyword phrase “sustainable design services” is leading to website visits, make sure your sustainable design page is set up and optimized in the same way on your new site as it is on your current site. By deleting this page or significantly changing its content, you could hurt your web traffic.

3. **Content**—Evaluate the performance of individual web pages. If certain pages are heavily trafficked and perform well in search engines, you most likely want to have similar pages on your new site. Also evaluate which pages are leading to early exits from your site. If a page has a high bounce rate or a high exit percentage, take some time to figure out why before the redesign.



### Consider a Usability Test

Website planning can be long and stressful, especially when multiple stakeholders are involved. To avoid internal arguments over navigation and design preferences, consider conducting a website usability test on your current site.

## Consider conducting a website usability test on your current site.

It sounds complicated and expensive, but it doesn't have to be. A usability test can be as simple as asking five to ten randomly selected people outside of your company to use your website while someone on your team takes notes.

A typical usability test involves asking the user to accomplish specific tasks (for example, “Please try to find the latest company news,” or “Please register for the newsletter”). The tester records the session and analyzes it to discover where the user had trouble. This kind of data speaks volumes and can help your team make tough design decisions.

For more on usability testing, you may want to read Steve Krug's classic book on the topic, *Don't Make Me Think*.

# 2

## Evaluate the Competition

After evaluating your current website, the next step in website planning is to evaluate the competition.

Keep in mind that your competition on the web may be different from your competition offline. To discover your online competitors, do a Google search on industry terms and make a list of the firms that rank in the top ten spots. If you are a construction firm, for example, you might search on terms such as “construction firms,” and “construction services.”

Now click through to each of the top ten relevant results in Google and take notes on each site. Look for elements you like as well as weaker features, and write down your observations.

As you make your way through these sites, ask yourself the following questions:

- > What is the main message the home page is trying to convey?  
Is it obvious?
- > What are the main navigation elements? How is this site structured?  
Does a structure like this make sense for my site?
- > Which audiences does this site appeal to? Does it treat all visitors the same, or does it segment visitors and send them down different pathways?
- > What words and phrases does this site focus on? Will this terminology resonate with my visitors?
- > What types of imagery stick out? What grabs my attention?
- > How does this site incorporate social media? Is it a main priority, or is social media's presence subtle or nonexistent?
- > What types of educational content does this site have? Does it have a blog or other library items? What are people writing about?
- > What are the offers and primary calls to action? To request a proposal? Download a white paper? Get started with a free trial? What makes sense for my site?



I like to use a basic PowerPoint file to keep track of my notes. You can take screen shots of competitors' websites and put them into slides. Then use callout boxes to take notes. This will allow you to quickly go through the sites later and share them with your team. See the figure below for an example of what I'm talking about.

If you take the time to analyze competitors' sites it will help you plan your own website in three major ways:

1. *Sitemap Formulation*—Seeing how other websites are structured and what pages they have in their navigation will allow you to begin developing your own structure.
2. *Message Differentiation*—By evaluating the messaging from other sites in your industry, you get a sense of what's out there. Knowing your competitors' marketing messages makes it a whole lot easier to stand out from them.
3. *Online Dominance*—Pulling the best elements from each website allows you to create a best-of-the-best final product. Many people have put tons of work into these other sites. Go ahead and take ideas from these websites—then make them better.



For job seekers

Certifications and codes

Quick description (passes 3 second test)

Easy to access case stories

Enough text for search engines

# 3

## Define Your Audiences

Do not treat all of your website visitors equally.

A common problem I see in professional services websites is a home page that doesn't properly segment visitors and send them down appropriate pathways.

It's important to have one main message that communicates your brand positioning, front and center. But please don't stop there. Visitors need to be told what to do next. If you understand your different audiences and walk them down tailored pathways, you make it as easy as possible for them to find what they are looking for.



### Do not treat all of your website visitors equally.

There is no best way to segment your audiences. In fact, there are many ways to go about it. Here are a handful of common methods.

**ROLE.** This segmentation strategy works well if your target visitors vary in job level. For instance, the language you use to address a senior-level VP will most likely be different from the language you use to address a technical IT manager.

EXAMPLE: Forrester Research (<http://www.forrester.com>)

**SIZE.** If your firm's service offerings vary greatly depending on the size of your client, consider sending small firms down different pathways from large firms.

EXAMPLE: Dataprise (<http://www.dataprise.com>)

**INDUSTRY.** Proving your expertise in a specific industry can be invaluable in building credibility. If you can do this quickly, your chances of making a positive connection with a visitor will increase.

EXAMPLE: Accenture (<http://www.accenture.com>)

**PURCHASING STAGE.** This approach is popular for firms that have a library of thought leadership pieces. These firms' websites often offer an educational pathway for visitors early in the buying process. They may also have pathways for visitors who are ready to make a purchasing decision, such as a link to case stories.

EXAMPLE: BI Consulting Group (<http://www.biconsultinggroup.com>)

**SERVICE OFFERING.** Some firms cut to the chase and simply list their main services or packages clearly on the home page. This approach segments visitors immediately by need.

EXAMPLE: 123 Web Design (<http://www.123webdesign.com>)

HingeUniversity.com'." data-bbox="144 412 842 620"/>

Want to do it yourself?

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Check out Hinge University: [HingeUniversity.com](http://HingeUniversity.com)

### What's Right for My Firm?

Sit down with your most experienced sales and business development people. Ask the group these three questions:

1. Who are the different types of prospects we are selling to?
2. In what ways do we treat them differently from each other?
3. Which prospects deserve the most focus and effort (who deserves the most attention on the home page?)

As you answer these fundamental website planning questions, it will become clear that what works offline will most likely work well online. If you can address your important audiences and send them down appropriate pathways, you will be able to deliver tailored messages, relevant content, and a more useful web experience.

# 4

## Define Goals for Conversion



Stop thinking of your website as an online brochure that presents basic information about your firm.

Start thinking of your website as a marketing tool with clearly defined, measurable goals.

Once you've determined who you are marketing to, you must then decide what you want visitors to accomplish while on your website. After all, a web visitor doesn't really matter if they don't take action.

**Start thinking of your website as a marketing tool with clearly defined, measurable goals.**

### What Are Goals and How Can I Track Them?

In most web analytics programs you have the ability to track a specific action of a web visitor. You can designate certain desirable actions as "goals." For example, a common action to track is web contact form submissions. You should consider this a goal because it moves a prospect closer to a sale.

When you set up important actions as goals in your analytics program, you can begin collecting data that will help you understand whether or not your website is generating and nurturing leads.

With analytics in place, you can see how many visitors have converted on a goal, and you can determine where those visitors came from. This information allows you to answer questions such as

- > Is Twitter sending me quality traffic?
- > Which keywords are connecting us to new leads?
- > Which web forms are performing well, and what pathways are visitors taking to get there?

To learn more about setting up goals, check out this article:

*One Way to Measure Professional Services Marketing* ([http://www.hingemarketing.com/blog/story/one\\_way\\_to\\_measure\\_professional\\_services\\_marketing/](http://www.hingemarketing.com/blog/story/one_way_to_measure_professional_services_marketing/))

## Different Levels of Goals

A typical professional services website has both hard goals and soft goals. An example of a hard goal is a request for a proposal or a form fill from a prospect with a specific need. Visitors late in the buying process—people who are ready to take the next step—often complete this type of goal.

At right is an example from our own website of an offer that would lead a visitor to complete a hard goal. The visitor clicks the call to action, fills out a web form, and converts.

What many firms don't consider is that a large percentage of visitors are early in the buying process. These visitors may be browsing for information or scouting out vendors for a future engagement. For these folks, it's important to have softer goals.

Just because some visitors aren't ready to do business today doesn't mean you shouldn't encourage them to take an action. Examples of soft goal conversions include ebook downloads, newsletter subscriptions, and blog subscriptions.

At right is an example of an offer that would lead a visitor to complete a soft goal. As with the hard goal, the visitor clicks on the offer, fills out a form, and converts.

Once you've collected visitors' contact information, you can then follow up with educational emails, which further build your firm's credibility. When the prospect is ready to do business, you are likely to be one of the first firms on their mind.



## Need some help with your website?

Hinge can create a custom website that sets your firm apart through our High Performance Website program.

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## **Which Goals Are Right for My Firm?**

Choosing the right goals and offers for your website isn't always easy. Often, the wording or presentation can make or break an offer. That's why it's important to track conversions and constantly experiment.

As a starting point, spend time with your team talking about the overall purpose of your site: what do you want each of your audiences to do while they are visiting, and how can you measure success?

# Determine Optimal Search Phrases

Ready to start writing the content for your new website? Stop!

Before rushing into content creation, take a step back. This is the perfect time to start thinking about search engine optimization (SEO)—before you commit words to your website. SEO is the process of improving your chances of getting found by search engines through using important words and phrases. Before writing your content and page titles, take a little time to understand what words your audiences are using to find firms like yours.

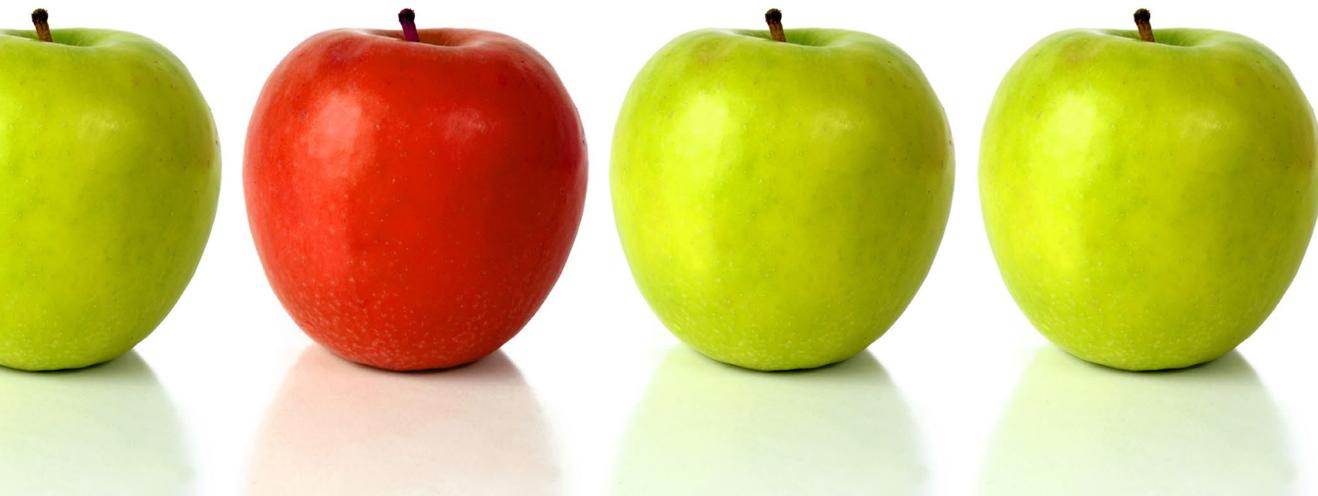
## What is Keyword Research?

Keyword research is where SEO begins. The concept is fairly simple: figure out which words and phrases people will use when they search for your firm in Google and other search engines.

The keyword research process goes something like this:

1. Brainstorm a list of keyword phrases relevant to your company
2. Research how many people search for each phrase
3. Research the difficulty of ranking for each phrase
4. Identify the phrases that have a high search volume and low difficulty
5. Create a web page for each keyword phrase you want to target

The content writer should work these keyword phrases into the pages of the site. In this way you help search engines understand what words you are attempting to rank for.



## How Do I Start Keyword Research?

SEO is far too complex a topic to cover in detail here. Identifying keyword opportunities, implementing keywords properly and improving rankings can be quite a challenge, so you may want to engage a professional to help you.

You can, however, at least start this process on your own by tapping your industry expertise and using a little imagination. Visit Google's free Keyword Tool\* and start brainstorming phrases that are relevant to your firm's services. As you type in keywords, the tool will reveal approximate monthly search volumes for each phrase. In addition, it will provide a list of related keywords you may not have thought of.

For example, if you work in a New York-based accounting firm, here are some keyword phrases you may want to try:

- > Accounting services
- > Accounting firm
- > Tax services new york
- > CPA services nyc

You will quickly begin to see that some phrases are more desirable, based on how many people are Googling each one. You will also discover that many of the broader terms ("accounting firm," for instance) are more competitive—and often difficult to attain. In general, the more specific the term, the easier it is to rank for. And while more-specific keyword phrases tend to have lower search volumes, the people who search on them are usually much more qualified and motivated to buy. That's the beauty of SEO.

I recommend working with an SEO expert to nail down the optimal phrases for each of your web pages (or at least the five to ten most important pages on your site). Having a list of target keywords will help you write about your services in a way that increases the likelihood that Google and other search engines will rank these pages highly.

SEO is an ongoing process with many moving parts. But conducting keyword research in the website planning phase is critical. This research provides the foundation for much of the content on your site.

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# 6

## Develop a Structure

When redesigning your website, you want to establish a structure that your visitors will understand quickly and easily. So repeat after me:

*My website structure is not the place to get creative.*

*My website structure is not the place to get creative.*

*My website structure is not the place to get creative.*

Got it? Many firms don't.

Instead of thinking of ways to make your website bigger, better, and more fabulous, try figuring out ways to make it simpler and easier to use. After all, web visitors use the internet to save time and find information quickly. Why not help them do that?

Here are three strategies to keep in mind when designing the structure of your professional services website.

1. *Start with the Essentials* – People have come to expect certain information on a website.

- > Who are you? (About pages)
- > What do you do? (Services pages)
- > How do you do it? (Case Stories pages)
- > How can I contact you? (Contact page)

Every professional services website should have some form of these pages. Starting with these major buckets is usually a good idea. Once you have the basics down, you may want to add a blog or other thought leadership pages.

Certain professional services industries — in particular architecture, engineering, and construction firms — use their websites to showcase key projects they have worked on. These portfolio sections often have many pieces, from photography to detailed project profiles. Be sure to plan early for these early so they don't hold up the web development process later.



2. *Minimize the Number of Main Navigation Items* – Try hard to keep the number of main navigation items to five or six. Don't have more than seven. Keeping main navigation options to a minimum helps people size up and make sense of your site. If you need to add additional content, create sub pages.

**EXAMPLE 1. TOO MANY ITEMS IN THE MAIN NAVIGATION**

HOME	LEADERSHIP	NEWS	CLIENTS	CONSULTING	ANALYTICS	STRATEGY	CONTACT
------	------------	------	---------	------------	-----------	----------	---------

**EXAMPLE 2. A BETTER SOLUTION**

HOME	ABOUT	SERVICES	CONTACT
	LEADERSHIP	CONSULTING	
	NEWS	ANALYTICS	
	CLIENTS	STRATEGY	

3. *Avoid Creative or Internal Industry Jargon* – The language you use every day within your firm may make sense to you and your team, but that doesn't mean it will resonate with web visitors who don't yet know you.

Do you know what page you will be taken to if you click on these items?

EXPLORE	UNCOVER	IGNITE	SUSTAIN
---------	---------	--------	---------

Probably not. For your site navigation, stick to language that is crystal clear up front.

**Are You Telling Me My Site Has to Be Boring?**

Of course not. There is plenty of room for creativity. Imagery, colors, and messaging are places where it's very important to stand out and be different. But the navigation and page structure? Not so much.

By keeping the structure simple and using familiar language, you offer a more functional and frustration-free experience.

# Develop Messaging and Content

*Your firm's messaging and content will make or break your website.*

An obvious point? Perhaps to some. But when I look around the web it amazes me how many sites present messages that are

- > generic
- > stale
- > wordy
- > unclear

And content that is

- > way too long
- > filled with jargon
- > formatted as thick, unskimmable paragraphs

Before you sit down and write a novel of fluffy jibber-jabber for your new site, take these three tips into consideration.

**Your goal should be able to quickly communicate your unique value as a brand.**

## **1. Find a Unique Position That You Can Support**

Often your first and only chance to connect with web visitors will be through the main message on your home page. Your goal should be to quickly communicate your unique value as a brand. What is your brand's position in the market?

Stay away from generic descriptors like "high quality," "the best people," or "unmatched value." Instead, find what truly sets your firm apart from competitors and communicate it in simple, clear words.



Not sure what differentiates your firm? Successful professional services companies conduct brand research to identify how they are perceived in the marketplace. Uncovering differentiators in this way will allow you to communicate unique value with confidence.

## I urge you to at least start working out a plan before talking to a designer.

### **2. Tailor Messages for Different Audiences**

Once you convince visitors to stick around for a bit, your next goal is to lead them down audience-specific pathways. Lead visitors to sub pages of your website and deliver them tailored, targeted messages.

If you conduct brand research, you will uncover what concerns your audiences have or what proof you need to sway them. Use this information to craft specific messages that connect with visitors on a more granular level. Often a great way to communicate these messages is within the headlines on sub pages—the first place visitors will direct their attention.

### **3. Keep Text Light and Benefit Oriented**

When writing the actual bulk of text on your pages, it's always a good idea to hire a professional copywriter. A professional that understands how to write for the web will

- > keep content short and sweet
- > avoid heavy blocks of paragraph text
- > focus heavily on bold text call-outs and bullet points
- > create copy that is benefit oriented, not service oriented

From keyword research earlier in the process, you should have a good idea of which words and phrases to blend into the text. Work closely with your search engine consultant and copywriter to ensure you achieve effective keyword densities on the pages you choose to optimize.

All too often, firms wait until the last minute before they think through their messaging and content creation. I urge you to at least start working out a plan before talking to a designer. It will make the design process much smoother.

## ABOUT HINGE

Hinge specializes in branding and marketing for the professional services. We are a leader in rebranding firms to help them grow faster and maximize value.

Our comprehensive offerings include research and strategy, brand development, award-winning creative, high performance websites, and marketing outsourcing.

Hinge conducts groundbreaking research on professional service companies. We have identified a group of firms that grow 9X faster and are 50% more profitable yet spend less than average to get new business. Hinge can show you how they do it.

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The High Performance Website Program makes your website into a lead-generating machine — bundling a beautiful new site with a suite of powerful online tools. Designed from the ground up to attract the right visitors from search engines, a high performance site uses educational content, smart offers, and custom features to engage and convert qualified leads.

For more information, call **703 391 8870** or email us at [info@hingemarketing.com](mailto:info@hingemarketing.com).

## Take the Next Step

Choose the option that's right for you.



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