

**EXECUTIVE  
SUMMARY**

There's no big secret to designing a great Web site. It's just a matter of following a well-defined path, and getting feedback from your customers at every step.

# The User-Centered Web Site

Seven steps to a site that sells homes. *By Blair Kuhnen*

**W**hy do so few Web development efforts live up to their promise? I know of at least two major homebuilders who had all the pieces in place when they embarked on Web site redesigns. They had buy-in from senior management, talented marketing people, a sizable budget, and great designers and developers. Yet they never got the doubling or tripling in lead volume they sought, and conversions of leads to sales remained low. What went wrong?

What these builders lacked was a process that focused squarely on how to help users accomplish their goals. Such a process is called user-centered design. Do it right, and visitors to your site will be more likely to show up at one of your models. Your salespeople will take care of the rest.

The good news is that user-centered design is neither hard nor expensive. The investment is minor and the payoff tremendous. Here are the key steps:

## 1. Know your customers

Find out what users want. Call 8 or 10 recent homebuyers, or post an online survey. Ask people why they visited your site and what they wanted to accomplish. Then look at e-mails received by your Web master, along with other customer feedback. Ask select individuals from your sales and marketing organization what your customers have been saying. Maybe a good number of users came looking for driving directions to one of your communities, but those directions were hard to find. Finally, hold an informal focus group to validate what you are hearing. One way to get recent buyers to participate is by offering a \$25 gift certificate to a local business.

## 2. Test your current site

Test different user scenarios. For instance, you could ask some people to go online and search for a home in a different city that they could move into in 30 days, and watch them in the process. This should yield a short list of high-impact changes you can make now. If people have trouble finding your Request for Information link, a simple redesign or rewording of the link could dramatically increase leads.

## 3. Create a development team

With most builders, the development team will consist

of a few key individuals; with a larger builder it may include corporate and division people. It shouldn't include Web designers at this point. The team will need to make a lot of decisions about what will be on your site, and who will control its content. For this reason, it must be credible in the eyes of the organization. You can include consultants, but the project leader should be a senior person in your company.

## 4. Define your goals

Share the research results from steps 1 and 2 with your team. Ask them, "Why do we have a Web site?" You're likely to get an answer like that given by Jack Miller, senior VP of marketing at Drees Homes, who said, "I designed our Web site to drive physical traffic to our neighborhoods." This seems like a no-brainer, but getting your team to commit to a clear goal will help them re-focus when things get murky later on. If for some reason your team's goals don't mesh with those of your customers, you need to continue the discussion until they do.

## 5. Survey the competition

This will start you thinking about content options. List your top five or ten competitors. Create a matrix of content, functional, and control features, and note which ones are on each competitor's site, as well as on yours. These features could include floor plans, color elevations, options, virtual tours, financing information, etc. Your goal is not to come up with a master list of items to add that will give you feature superiority. Your goal is to identify areas for further discussion. Armed with this matrix and the results of your initial research, your team can start deciding what features will best help customers reach their goals.

## 6. Bring in the designers

Now add the Web designers to the team, and assemble the team for a kick-off meeting. This is the time to review your research, agree upon goals, discuss what you like and don't like about your Web site and your competitors' sites, and start making decisions about functionality and content. Again, the goal of your site should be to help your primary customers reach their goals. If your business focus is the move-up buyer, having a link on your home page for multiple-time buyers will probably be counterproductive. Move this and



other secondary information to another page. Deciding what not to make a priority may be the hardest task. Everyone will want a piece of your homepage and will likely come to you with solid-sounding arguments for why their pet link needs to be there. You and your team need to stand firm, based on the goals and design principles you have agreed upon.

The designers' charge is to assimilate what they learn at the kick-off meeting and come up with alternative designs for your review. Three options should be plenty. When the team gets back together, a merging will happen. The testing can begin.

## 7. Test to the home stretch

The design will go through a number of iterations. I recommend starting with paper prototypes of wire frames, moving on to graphically rich mock-ups, and ending with your functional Web site. You will test for different things at each stage. At the prototype stage you want feedback on your information architecture—where you should put things and what you should name them. Later, users will test the site's ease of use. You can hire a usability lab for these tests, or assemble your own users and test them informally. If you would

like to read more about usability engineering or prototyping, see [www.luxsolutions.com](http://www.luxsolutions.com) for additional resources and links.

Sound expensive? Not really, for two reasons. First, these can be done at very low cost through a combination of paper prototypes and small, informal user groups. Second, the savings in code rework alone will more than pay for the added expense. And the process will also help your project to stay on schedule. Once you start developing this way, you will begin to look at all your IT projects differently. By starting and ending with your users, you will be more confident in both your direction and the likely outcome. You also may find that you enjoy the process more than you did before.

The real payoff will be a site that helps customers accomplish their goals. Once they can do so, they will be more likely to ask for more information, and to make that all-important first neighborhood visit. **THE**

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