

Designing a museum website, comprehensively

Like many other museums, Museum Victoria has been re-designing its websites to take advantage of new production tools and content management systems. The redesigned Melbourne Museum website was launched on July 4 and the new Museum Victoria site goes live mid-August.

Whether you are developing a new website or re-designing an existing one, working with an in-house team or a contractor, one thing remains the same: comprehensive planning is the key.

Firstly, it's important to develop a shared understanding of what the website is for. It may take time, but key decision-makers and everyone else involved should agree on the product before proceeding with concept development.

Museum websites are often required to serve many needs. What is the purpose of this website? Who is it for? Is it to be a virtual exhibition, interpreting the museum's collections for web users around the world, or do you want an interactive marketing brochure for current and potential audiences planning a 'physical visit' to exhibitions and other public programs? Who are your internal and external stakeholders? Analyse the needs and characteristics of your target audiences, including Internet access. Look at and compare the wide range of museum websites already out there. Note what you like and dislike, and the ease of access to information.

Examples can help articulate a concept, and assist development of navigation and site structure later in the process. A range of technical reviews may also form part of the process for pre-production planning - technical implementation, site maintenance, use monitoring, and considerations relating to bandwidth, software and hardware. Website accessibility and usability should be addressed in all projects, regardless of whether the project is to

be hosted by a council community site or your own server.

Now consider the content of the website. Include strategies for content creation now and in the future. Could the museum re-purpose exhibition and print publications for the web, and what are the copyright and permission issues? Plan for media integration - for example, combining an image with a digital audio recording of a lecture is more engaging than a transcript alone. Take into account the resources needed to maintain dynamic information - consider incorporating a content man-

Design development begins with a visual communication focus, as graphic concepts for the web pages and navigation take shape. The role of a designer/developer is to ensure that your website reflects the 'brand values' of the museum, and to ensure that site functionality suits the target audiences. Most web sites will go through three evaluation stages: flat visuals of the design; working example of the selected functionality/navigation; and completed site for proofing. As with all projects, a website production plan include schedules for development, implementation and promotion.



agement system. Explore possible marketing and evaluation roles for the website, within your museum's current strategies.

Once stakeholders' issues have been addressed, you can prepare the design brief. Outline the tone and manner of the museum's web presence, describe the target audiences, what is unique about your museum and what its brand values are. Append reference information, such as examples of your museum's existing graphic communications or style manual, web accessibility guidelines or technical environment. State the performance indicators that will measure the success of the project.

<http://melbourne.museum.vic.gov.au/>

This new site includes information about exhibitions and education programs, a live bulletin board for current and upcoming events at Melbourne Museum, plus practical information about costs and opening hours. The site was designed to be user-friendly and accessible to a wide audience, catering for people using old and new technologies.

— *Janet Marlow, Manager Online Education, project managed development and construction of the new Melbourne Museum website. The site was coded and built by the Digital Publishing team at Museum Victoria. Michael Kratofil, New Media Director, headed the design development team at Swish Group*