Planning

Web sites are developed by groups of people to meet the needs of other groups of people. Unfortunately, Web projects are often approached as a "technology problem," and projects are colored from the beginning by enthusiasms for particular Web techniques or browser plug-ins (Flash, digital media, XML, databases, etc.), not by real human or business needs. People are the key to successful Web projects. To create a substantial site you'll need content experts, writers, information architects, graphic designers, technical experts, and a producer or committee chair responsible for seeing the project to completion. If your site is successful it will have to be genuinely useful to your target audience, meeting their needs and expectations without being too hard to use.

Although the people who will actually use your site will determine whether the project is a success, ironically, those very users are the people least likely to be present and involved when your site is designed and built. Remember that the site development team should always function as an active, committed advocate for the users and their needs. Experienced committee warriors may be skeptical here: these are fine sentiments, but can you really do this in the face of management pressures, budget limitations, and divergent stakeholder interests? Yes, you can — because you have no choice if you really want your Web project to succeed. If you listen only to management directives, keep the process sealed tightly within your development team, and dictate to imagined users what the team imagines is best for them, be prepared for failure. Involve real users, listen and respond to what they say, test your designs with them, and keep the site easy to use, and the project will be a success.

What are your goals?

A short statement identifying two or three goals should be the foundation of your Web site design. The statement should include specific strategies around which the Web site will be designed, how long the site design, construction, and evaluation periods will be, and specific quantitative and qualitative measures of how the success of the site will be evaluated. Building a Web site is an ongoing process, not a one-time project with static content. Long-term editorial management and technical maintenance must be covered in your budget and production plans for the site. Without this perspective your electronic publication will suffer the same fate as many corporate communications initiatives — an enthusiastic start without lasting accomplishments.
Know your audience

The next step is to identify the potential readers of your Web site so that you can structure the site design to meet their needs and expectations. The knowledge, background, interests, and needs of users will vary from tentative novices who need a carefully structured introduction to expert "power users" who may chafe at anything that seems to patronize them or delay their access to information. A well-designed system should be able to accommodate a range of users' skills and interests. For example, if the goal of your Web site is to deliver internal corporate information, human resources documents, or other information formerly published in paper manuals, your audience will range from those who will visit the site many times every day to those who refer only occasionally to the site.

Design critiques

Each member of a site development team will bring different goals, preferences, and skills to the project. Once the team has reached agreement on the mission and goals of the project, consensus on the overall design approach for the Web site needs to be established. The goal at this stage is to identify potential successful models in other Web sites and to begin to see the design problem from the site user's point of view.

Unfortunately, production teams rarely include members of the target audience for the Web site. And it is often difficult for team members who are not already experienced site designers to articulate their specific preferences, except in reference to existing sites. Group critiques are a great way to explore what makes a Web site successful, because everyone on the team sees each site from a user's point of view. Have each team member bring a list of a few favorite sites to the critique, and ask them to introduce their sites and comment on the successful elements of each design. In this way you will learn one another's design sensibilities and begin to build consensus on the experience that your audience will have when they visit the finished site.

Content inventory

Once you have an idea of your Web site's mission and general structure, you can begin to assess the content you will need to realize your plans. Building an inventory or database of existing and needed content will force you to take a hard look at your existing content resources and to make a detailed outline of your needs. Once you know where you are short on content you can concentrate on those deficits and avoid wasting time on areas with existing resources that are ready to use. A clear grasp of your needs will also help you develop a realistic schedule and budget for the project. Content development is the hardest, most time-consuming part of any Web site development project. Starting early with a firm plan in hand will help ensure that you won't be caught later with a well-structured but empty Web site.