

Simple websites, Car wash and Tsar

by Sergei Nikolajev

This essay will be useful to those entrepreneurs who don't know what a website is made of. Why would you want to know this? Firstly, having at least some basic understanding of the technology behind websites wouldn't hurt. Secondly, you will find yourself harder to be taken advantage of. By the end of this piece you will either learn something new about websites or will learn to look at the website creation process from a different perspective.

“How much for a simple website?” I have encountered this type of inquiry on different platforms numerous times. It seems to me that we are increasingly casually expecting simple solutions to complex problems. It might have something to do with being spoiled by getting results super fast (in under a few seconds), or being overwhelmed with the amount of choices; maybe it's both. Whenever we are faced with something complicated, our immediate reaction is – “I want nothing of that, get me a simple answer to my question.”

Solving complex problems is a tough mental endeavor that consumes a lot of energy and it is no wonder people choose not to act or are drawn towards the promise of a simple solution. We google for questions like: “How to make a simple website” and get “About 3,940,000,000 results” in 0.74 seconds¹. Seeing this ridiculously high number of possible answers inevitably lead us to an overwhelming urge to ‘get this over with’ and clicking on one of the top three links without going further than the first page of the results. Complex problems are hard, irritating and frustrating, and we would rather prefer avoiding them. They contain numerous variables – the backbone of most websites. In order to get to an easy answer, you'd have to break the complexity into smaller pieces and address each of the parts individually. The process is neither straightforward nor fast.

Firstly, you think you need something ‘*simple*’ but here's a problem – you don't know the technology behind websites and therefore can't fathom what constitutes simple. Does it have to look *simple* like the first page of Google or Craigslist or have some *basic* functionality? And what exactly is – *simple*? If you are making judgments over simplicity based on the looks, then Google's website appears to be really simple, which in fact, it is – in terms of the layout design. However, the technology **behind** this website is so complicated and valuable that the company's revenue is as big as Latvia's GDP² quadrupled. How much would you pay for a website that generates billions every quarter?



Secondly, you have no idea what features your business actually needs and (most importantly) can afford for your excuse of a budget because this is all new to you: you don't know the vocabulary, the ropes, the prices, the difference between complex and basic stuff. You haven't figured out who your customers are, how much you're going to charge for your product and what your revenue would look like – all of it is a big mystery to you at the SEED stage.

Imagine you're at the car wash. You have a few options: an automated soap wash, a hand wash, wax-'n-seal and a full-service, inside-out, all-inclusive car wash. When you're asking for the basic, simple car wash, you mean the **cheapest** option possible and you know exactly what you're getting and how much it will cost. When it comes to building a simple website – you are not fully aware of what that entails. The point is: when trying to impetuously contemplate over complexity of a website as a whole, you shouldn't view the looks and the inner works separately; you should also take some time to learn about the fundamentals of the technology.

To get a glimpse of what a basic website might be and have a shot at defining what is *simple*, we have to look at the basics. I will assume you know what a computer file is and what folders are. A website is basically a collection of files placed in folders that are organized into a structure. Files have different formats, e.g. *.php, *.html, *.css, *.js and so on. Each of the files contains information (code) that has to be interpreted by the machine (computer) that executes them in order for a website to work. A computer has to 'speak' or be able to understand the programming language the website had been written in.

There are different back-end languages that a website can be built with, e.g. PHP, Java, Ruby, Python, etc. PHP is the most widespread one and I will further assume our hypothetical website is written in PHP. You can also build your website with a front-end technology: JavaScript, HTML. Most websites are built with back-end and front-end technologies combined. The most common composition is – PHP plus HTML, plus JavaScript, plus CSS.

In order for our website to be available to visitors, you have to place (deploy) all of the files and folders onto a server that supports the chosen language (PHP in our case). A server is a type of computer made for the purpose of storing data, running code and serving results of computations. Having your website files stored on someone else's server will cost you money. If your website gets a lot of visitors (high traffic) you will be paying more money. Why? Because you would need to support a bigger infrastructure: more storage, more servers, increased electricity consumption.

“So, how much would it cost me to make a simple website then?” From my experience both as an entrepreneur who had hired developers and a full-stack web developer who had worked with clients, I have discovered that there is no clear, indisputable answer to this question. It's also the



wrong question to ask. The problem of simplicity of a website is a subject of interpretation. On the one hand, every client has their own vision of what a basic website should look like based on their knowledge and, on the other hand, every developer has **their** own convictions based on experience. From what I've seen, these two rarely match.

From the clients' perspective, a simple website is the most common site template they have encountered a thousand times on the web. Since so many companies use the same widespread solution, clients assume that it must be inexpensive and efficient. Couple that with the ubiquitous ads promising 'free' websites that "you can build yourself" and you get a justified misconception of what a basic website should look like with an imagined cost expectancy based on false assumptions. Usually, from clients' point of view, a three-to-five-page website with a contact form and a content management system is a perfect example of a simple website.

From the developers' perspective, a simple website is anything that could be deployed and launched within a couple of hours. This means that there is no actual development or customization – just a manual, dull copy-pasting pattern. However, it's rarely the case that clients are happy with the generic fit-for-all template, hence they request custom features and additional functionality. Whenever there's a request for something out of the ordinary streamlined process, things get complicated and webdevs no longer consider a website to be *simple*.

During the dialogue (that should but doesn't always take place) between the client and the web designer/developer the code words *simple* and *basic* manifest themselves quite frequently and it takes determination and patience on both ends to untangle what these words actually stand for. Once revealed, it isn't such a rare case that for the client they represent the cheapest possible option while for the developer – the least time and effort they can commit. I think of this approach as being neither efficient nor beneficial to either party as it is akin to a race to the bottom. The less you want to pay me, the less work I'll put in. The less work you're going to put in, the less I'm willing to pay you. This spirals down and produces nothing but remorse, corruption and wasted resources.

"How much would a basic website cost?" is an amateurish, shallow and pointless question at the time of inception of your entrepreneurial adventure. That is why I consider this to be the wrong question to begin with. Nowadays when I hear someone say they need a basic, simple website I know exactly what they mean – they want to pay as little as possible for something they know nothing about. It reminds me of a famous Russian folk tale where tsar orders his guilty servant to "Go there – I don't know where, fetch me that – I know not what." And Ivan the Fool actually goes about this business venture.



Read the next essay about [why you're building your SEED website](#).

1 - Results from Google search made by Sergei Nikolajev on 10 June 2020 from NYC, NY, USA.

2 - Latvian GDP approx. 34 billion USD, source:

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=LV> ;

Google revenue in 2019 was approx. 160 billion USD, source:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/266206/googles-annual-global-revenue/>

