Elephants, Targets and Beacons

by Sergei Nikolajev

The very first question you would want to answer is – why. Why do you think your SEED stage business needs a website? If the answer is something like: "Everyone has one. I got to have it too", "My competitors have great websites, so I need one as well" or "You just have to have one these days" – then, while being true, these responses do not provide a comprehensive answer to the actual question.

Is it you who thinks you need a website or is it really your business that requires one? Is this an inevitable investment or a nice-to-have-one expense? If this is a business investment, then you should figure out who you are building this website for – yourself, your employees or your customers, and what is it that your business needs to achieve. If you can't provide answers to these questions then you'll have issues with setting the goals properly and usually not having specific targets is a bad idea.

So, let's talk about the goal of your website first. The goal is the thing you will be aiming at – it will help you choose the direction, set the vector and orient yourself and your business along that axis. Your website's goal could be something like this: getting followers, selling products online, accumulating subscribers, increasing the number of downloads, growing your readers' or listeners' base – whatever that is, the composition of your website will have to accommodate for it.

A website is a tool. It can help you get what you want and get you to where you want to be but it is your job to figure out what and where that is. If you want a digital business card, your website can be that. If you want a robust customer-centric adaptive online store, your can have that too.

Understanding your website's primary goal helps selecting the right medium to use – a blog, an e-commerce store, an online magazine, a podcast, a landing page, a portfolio or a combination of those. You shouldn't be dismissive about the existing technology either. Look into utilizing such platforms as YouTube, Instagram, Amazon or Twitter – they can be better in many ways and you won't have to spend nearly as much time, effort and money on setting them up in comparison to the development of your own website.

Websites Worth Making

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I had hired developers to design and build my first online store back in 2008. We had everything done – beautiful images, layouts, type, copy, colors, admin panel with content management– everything except one tiny little thing called payment processing. We were unable to accept payments online. So, basically it was everything but an online store. It sounds ridiculous, right? But this is exactly what happens when you fail to set the goal properly and, unfortunately, this is how many of us approach problems in life – avoid dealing with the most obvious elephant in the room.

It should've been executed in reverse – payment processing first, everything else – secondary. Since my first e-commerce project I had opened several other online stores. Most of the projects were a total failure as I haven't learned my lesson the first time – I haven't answered the fundamental questions: why you're making a website, who are you building it for and what's the bloody goal.

Let's say your plan is to sell products on your website. That means that the primary focus should always be on making sure this can actually happen. Is it important to have a thought-through, well-designed, easy-to-use admin panel to be able to add and alter products? Yes, of course. But will your customers care about your robust, state-of-the-art internal CMS so much that this feature will help you make the sale? You don't have to answer this one – it's a rhetorical question. In my experience, products sell even when images are not perfect, when the copy lacks the right words, when the layout looks amateurish. And I know for sure that the sale will not happen when you can't accept the payment.

Setting a primary goal for a website is crucial. It has to be realistic and achievable as well. I know it's tempting to say: "There is no limit to how much we can make selling this stuff, dude. So why bother spending time on research and analysis – all the boring stuff?" However, the reality is different. There are forces at play that you can't control and foresee: objective limitations, timing, market size, competition, luck and acts of God, if you will. Set your goal – it will help you navigate the sea of constant storms. Like a dim beacon shining, shimmering in the distance among the ravaging waves and savage wind gusts, helping your shabby boat to stay on course. Sounds dramatic, I know.

All of this leads us to the next inevitable question – "What functionality do I need to build into my website for my SEED stage start-up and why?" It's a hard and complicated question to provide an answer to right off the bat, because no one really knows what's best for your startup. The answer will be manifesting itself partially during the lifecycles of your business. You would have to fine-tune your website's functionality to aim at specific targets. And you might have a plethora of those, so you have to limit and constrain yourself. You don't need to spend time

and money on payment gateways, security and online carts if you're not going to sell online. You don't need to integrate social media if you're not posting relevant content on a regular basis.

You will be making stupid mistakes and then, hopefully, you'll learn what's important for your business and what is not. You should be prepared for that and voluntarily accept it as one of the main prerequisites of being an entrepreneur. If you aren't terrified of the idea of building a website yet and you have come to a conclusion that your business actually requires one, then you should return to the obvious question – "How much would it cost me to build a ~~simple~~ website?" The major difference is that now you know better than to anticipate a shallow answer. Instead, you'll be looking for something else. Let's look into the composition of a minimum viable website first.

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