

Is your site ready to face the New Year?

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Is your site ready to face the New Year?

By James Saunders

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As we look back at another year, and forward to another, there's time to reflect on how our websites performed in the last year and decide on what improvements need to be made for the New Year ahead. This is the first part of a two-part article that looks at 10 things that a website owner can do to improve their websites for the New Year.

Did your site perform as well as it could have in 2004?

If you own an ecommerce store, did it receive as many orders as you'd have liked during the festive period? Did you get lots of support requests asking for further information? Did your site suffer from a high abandonment rate? We all need our sites to be successful and produce a return on investment on the cost of promotion and advertising. However, it's easy to be taken in by technology and miss the basics that will help improve the performance of your website, decrease abandonment and increase conversion.

The list below identifies 10 ways in which you can improve your website. All of the improvements can be made without major investment, new technology or the need for additional resources:

1. Ensure that you make your USP/benefits clear on every page
2. Ensure that provide improved ways in which your visitors can contact you
3. Improve the quality of the information on your site such that they can make informed purchasing decisions
4. Ensure that your site is accessible to all visitors and search engines
5. Add new ways of delivering content to 3rd parties
6. Improve conversion through removing unnecessary registration and requests for too much information
7. Offer greater customer service through not only meeting ecommerce regulations but surpassing them
8. Improve the site such that it offers an improved user-experience
9. Stop worrying about page rank and start focusing on customers
10. Take time to understand how visitors use your site and learn from that knowledge

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1. Ensure that you make your USP/benefits clear on every page

The Internet breaks down many boundaries. Not only has the Internet made it possible for everyone to trade online, but it has also removed geographical barriers making it far easier to purchase products from overseas. However, as an ecommerce site owner, this leads to increased competition. In the high-street, you may have had a handful of competitors. Now, you may have hundreds or thousands. Therefore, it's necessary to stand out from the crowd and clearly identify your business and website's USPs and benefits. These may be:

- Price
- Product quality
- Service quality
- Product knowledge
- Product uniqueness
- Product availability
- Free delivery

No matter what your USPs are, make sure that they are clearly identified on your website and make sure that these USPs are visitor-focused by asking yourself the question, how does the USP benefit the visitor.

2. Ensure that you provide improved ways in which your visitors can contact you

Visitors are bound to have questions regarding the products/services that you provide as well as about your business. In order to assist visitors make informed decisions, it's important that you provide the answers to these questions on your site. There are a number of ways of doing this. These include :

- Frequently asked questions - as you receive new questions from visitors, ensure that you add them to your FAQ
- About us information
- Improved product information

However, it's clearly not always possible to pre-empt the full range of questions a visitor may ask. Therefore, make sure that you make it easy for visitors to contact you if they have questions. Also, ensure that these ways of communicating with you are clearly identified on your website by locating them in the header area of each page. Popular means of allowing visitors to contact you include:

- Email
- Telephone - clearly identify the hours that you can be contacted
- Contact us form - an improvement on email as you can direct visitors to include information to enable you to be able to provide an improved service
- Live Help - only provide live help if you are able to support it full time
- Call me - make it easier by calling visitors back at a mutually convenient time
- VoIP (e.g. Skype or Vonage) - save money by using Internet telephony
- Ticket-based support
- Forums

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3. Improve the quality of the information on your site such that they can make informed purchasing decisions

Unless you sell unique products or services, there's the possibility that you use product information provided by the product manufacturer or supplier. Although this information can be very detailed, in most cases, it isn't or the information is targeted more at those selling the product rather than those wanting to purchase it.

Due to the ease in which the information can be used on your site, it's likely to be used on many of your competitor's sites too.

Stand out from the crowd and provide personalised content about the products and services that you sell. After all, to be able to sell your products and services, you need to be familiar with their use, features and unique selling points. Make sure that the product details you provide include as much information as possible in an easy-to-read and enticing format.

4. Ensure that your site is accessible to all visitors and search engines

Many ecommerce stores remain inaccessible to many visitors and search engines. Given the need to ensure that all websites are accessible to visitors with disabilities, it is very important to ensure that your website meets the WCAG guidelines for website accessibility. For more information about the guidelines, check out the RNIB's Web Access Centre at http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/code/public_rnib008789.hcsp.

Some of the most important visitors to your website are search engine spiders. These spiders visit the pages on your site and are used to rank the pages within the search engines for particular keywords and phrases. The spiders follow links to your site from other sites, and then follow the links within the site. However, there are certain impediments that may prevent spiders from getting to some or all pages within your website. These include:

Use of JavaScript menus - some JavaScript menus do not include links to internal pages within the website that search engine can follow. If possible, replace the JavaScript menu with an alternate CSS based menu.

Use of dynamic URL parameters - search engines are getting more tolerant to having multiple parameters in URLs. However, it is still advised that no more than 3 or 4 parameters are used.

Use of session IDs - Many ecommerce stores require the use of session information in order to be able to maintain information about visitors as they interact with the store. However, if session IDs are passed as URL parameters, they can prevent search engines from spidering the website.

It is very important that these impediments are removed in order that your site can be completely spidered. For example, an ecommerce site may have many thousands of pages (associated with the products). However, through the use of too many dynamic URL parameters or session IDs, the major search engines may only be able to list a handful. This therefore gives less content available within the search engines associated with your website that could potentially be found by a search engine user.

5. Add new ways of delivering content to 3rd parties

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Article and news syndication using RSS (Really Simple Syndication) is becoming widespread across the Internet. However, to date, syndication of content for ecommerce stores hasn't been as popular. This is set to change and ecommerce site owners start to use content syndication to keep their visitors and customers up to date with their:

Latest news
Special offers

The use of content syndication can be used to replace the need to publish opt-in newsletters. This saves you time and ensures that your visitors/customers are always up-to-date with the latest developments on your website.

In part 2 of this article, we will provide more detail about the following tips for website success in 2005:

6. Improve conversion through removing unnecessary registration and requests for too much information
7. Offer greater customer service through not only meeting ecommerce regulations but surpassing them
8. Improve the site such that it offers an improved user-experience
9. Stop worrying about page rank and start focusing on customers
10. Take time to understand how visitors use your site and learn from that knowledge

James Saunders is the Managing Director of Site-Report.com Limited (<http://www.site-report.com>), a UK internet consultancy offering holistic advice to UK SMEs on all aspects of website development and promotion including usability, accessibility, ecommerce regulations, internet marketing and search engine optimisation.

2006, Is It Your Year?

By Hifzur Rehman

Do you think 2006 is "YOUR" year or just "another" year in your life similar to the previous ones? What does 2006 mean to you?

What is your slogan for 2006?

2006 is My Year of Happiness

2006 is My Year of Success

2006 is My Year of Achievement

2006 is My Year of Marriage

2006 is My Year of Fitness

2006 is My Year of Spiritual Enhancement

2006 is My Year of Financial Independence

2006 is My Year of Getting Excellent Results in Exams

2006 is My Year of Learning a Foreign Language

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2006 is My Year of Improving Writing Skills

2006 is My Year of Buying a House

The bells are ringing and we are just counting the days when 2006 will enter into our lives. Are you fully prepared to welcome 2006 and want to make it the most rewarding, fruitful and memorable year of your life?

What mistakes did you do last year? What went wrong with your agenda? What remedial actions do you want to take now?

Are you expecting some miracles to occur in 2006? Nothing positive will happen unless you take control of your life and decide to change your life in the manner you want to live. Without effort and without proper planning your fate will remain the same as it is in the present moment.

Wake up! Face the reality and act now! Start 2006 with a strong commitment. Choose your own slogan for the new year. Make it YOUR year. Say loudly and repeatedly "It's MY year, every day is MY day, every night is MY night and every month is MY month (January to December)".

Are you ready to jump start new year with a new slogan, new vigor and new enthusiasm? I am sure, you are, because it's YOUR year. Good luck in the year 2006!

Hifzur Rehman, the editor of

, is an author of motivational articles. His

website is a great source of inspiration to those who want to live a happy, healthy and successful life.

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