

Chapter 9:

Building Your Website: Leading Readers Down Your Yellow Brick Road

On the Web, content is king. Visitors to your website expect the site to look professional, to have graphics that load quickly and that make sense with your type of business, but it's what you actually say and offer on your site that leads to sales.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy followed the "Yellow Brick Road" to find a wizard who would solve her problems. Your website should provide visitors with a compelling pathway to the content that helps them find what they most desire. For non-fiction books, that means helping them understand how your book solves a problem or opens up possibilities for them. For fiction books, it's the allure of a wonderful escape into a world with action, adventure, romance, humor and memorable characters.

As you know from the previous chapters, your website is important to help you attract new readers, as well as stay in contact with existing readers. It should also be used to impress reporters and reviewers who stop by to check you and your book out to assure that you're legitimate. For many authors, a website is also where you will also sell your book and offer related products, such as coaching programs, t-shirts or mugs, etc. Your website needs to be working for you 24/7 to help you make sales and get great publicity.

That's why content is so important. At a minimum, your website should provide visitors with these essentials:

- A compelling reason why buying the book will solve a problem or provide a benefit
- Enough about you for them to recognize you as a professional and expert
- A free sample so visitors can do the online equivalent of browsing through the book in a bookstore.

Other ideas for content that will help keep your site fresh and keep you in contact with readers include:

- A bio with relevant details

- Web audio/video
- Automatic updates from your blog or podcast
- Link to Facebook, Meetup and Twitter sites
- Q&A, author interviews, bonus goodies
- Free download to build your opt-in (permission-based) email list
- Upcoming events
- Photos and comments on past events
- Extra content
- Forum for discussions or comments
- Link to Amazon
- Sales page

Unfortunately, instead of being the “Yellow Brick Road,” too many websites are dead-ends filled with broken links, outdated information, incomplete or hard to follow content, confusing navigation and slow performance. When would-be readers encounter any of these hurdles, they leave the site, usually without buying anything.

Creating the Road Map

The trick is to woo prospective readers and make your current fans come back for more. To do that, it’s important to have a plan before you put up your site. Here are some things to consider:

- What path do you want readers (and potential book buyers) to take through your site?
- Which pages do you want reporters or reviewers to find immediately?
- How will you persuade browsers to become buyers?
- What will you offer existing readers to build your relationship with them?

Remember that visitors to your website want to find information quickly. That means that there should be a logical route to the important pages for 1) new readers, 2) reporters, 3) reviewers and 4) current readers. Spend some time answering these questions for each type of visitor:

- What information would be most important to this visitor?
- What questions do they have that I can answer?

- How can I engage them to encourage them to buy, stay in touch, interview me or review the book?
- How can I reward them for visiting me?

Once you have answers to these questions, think about how to organize this information. Ideally, you should have a different destination page for each type of visitor so you aren't asking one type of reader to wade through information unrelated to their interests. Here are some tips to make your "road map" easy for visitors to follow:

- Name a page for each type of visitor, for example, "new readers," "current readers," "media," "reviewers." Use these page names in your site navigation so visitors can go immediately to the pages that are meant for them.
- Make the paths through your site short and clear. Try to make it possible to reach the visitor's desired destination in three clicks or less.
- Limit the number of links that go back and forth between your pages. Lots of internal links make pages difficult to update and can lead to broken links and error messages.
- Plan to have some pages be easy for you to update (like a blog) so that you can change information that quickly becomes dated, such as upcoming events.
- If visitors will be encouraged to purchase books or other items from your website, make the shopping cart easy to find and test it yourself to make sure it is easy to use. Any shopping cart page that requests credit card information must have a secure "https" address (look for the padlock symbol.)

It's easy to get so caught up in adding pages that you lose sight of how lengthy and complicated a site becomes. When you have a draft of your site ready, have a couple of friends help you check to see how user friendly it is by giving them a list of items or specific information to find and then watch them as they search. Do they become frustrated? Can they find the information quickly? Did they run into links that were broken or dead-end pages that kept them from getting back to previous pages? Did the shopping cart work and was it easy to use?

For your website to be successful, it needs to be easy to use and friendly. Its layout should be professional looking so that they can find what they want and feel comfortable trusting you with their payment.

Assignment 9: A Great Website Requires Research & Planning

- Visit sites of other authors who are established and successful to get an idea of what you like and what you don't like from their sites. Try to pick authors who write the same general type of book as yours (fiction, self-help, specific kind of non-fiction, etc.). Make a list of the things you want to use on your site and what you want to avoid.
- Plan your road map by grouping related content together on pages that easily lead the reader down the path you want him to take. Remember to keep it short and try to require no more than three clicks!
- If you're paying someone to help build your site, show your designer your road map to avoid costly revisions later. If you're creating your own site, you might want to create a paper version (one sheet of paper for each web page) and ask a couple of friends to see if they can follow your road map to specific destinations without getting lost.

“Been There, Done That” Author Tip

“Looking for a low-cost and fast way to get your book website up and running? I have used Lunar Pages (www.lunarpages.com) LP Quicksite templates for my books. For less than \$250 including one year of domain hosting, I create a custom header (with the help of my graphic designer) that can easily be placed in a custom header template. Then using their easy-to-administer website content management system, I have literally had a website up and live within a weekend! Their LP Quicksite offering gives numerous choices of templates and includes a blog, shopping cart and gallery feature. You don't need to know HTML, but if you know a little, it can be a WOW site at a WOW cost savings!”

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