

AbaF

Developing a website

There is no doubt that websites have become a useful tool for artists to document, exhibit and market their work. Whether looking to sell art via the internet, host exhibitions online or provide an informative source of information to gallery directors, curators and potential clients, there are some key points to consider when setting up a website.

Getting started

The key to successfully building a website is to make sure you are clear about what purpose your website will serve and what resources you have at your disposal, as this information will determine everything else. Do not let the website you select be driven by the latest technology rather than your needs as an artist. Key questions you need to answer before you start include:

Who is my audience?

- Can they find the site, and if they do, will they be able to use it?
- How much effort should I spend on optimising the site for search engines?

What is my web footprint?

- Can I compliment my site with other resources such as Flickr or YouTube?
- Is the information I am presenting consistent with my gallery?

What is my budget?

- Should I build it myself, buy a template or undertake a customised build?
- Who is responsible for fixing it if it breaks?
- Can I update the site easily?

Do I have the time?

- How will I manage and update content?
- What if I want to change the design or layout of the site?

Will I sell works online?

- Will I process the transactions within my site or on another site like PayPal?
- Do I need to worry about security and privacy?

Once you are comfortable you know the answers to these questions you're ready to continue.

Your options

You have three options once you decide to go ahead with building a website. These include:

- *Build it from scratch*

Each approach has its advantages and disadvantages. Building it from scratch by yourself will take much longer but will give you more control over how the website looks and operates. You might need to invest in software such as Adobe Dreamweaver and purchase books on coding in HTML and CSS. This can be a more rewarding, but much more frustrating approach.

- *Purchase a website template*

Purchasing a template website is likely to be the fastest and cheapest option, but gives you the least control over the look and feel of the website. You can select from either a generic template which is not specific to artists but can be modified to suit or a specialised artist template. Within each category you have those templates which come with a content management system so you don't require technical skills to manage your website and those that require you do every change by hand.

- *Purchase a custom website*

The third option which is often the easiest but certainly the most expensive is to buy a custom built website from a web designer. This approach is the safest, as you are almost certainly going to get the website you are after, but you lose both control and flexibility that you would otherwise have if you built it yourself.

Warning: Make sure the designer shows you the layout and design for the website well in advance of building the website as it will be difficult to change the structure or design without significant additional expense.

Key design considerations

The key considerations when designing your website include:

Should I use a splash page?

- Is captivating new users more important than frustrating regular visitors?

What sort of layout should I use?

- Do you want a fixed or 'liquid' layout?
- Is the emphasis on text or images?
- Will the navigation be vertical or horizontal and how many separate menus do I need?

What fonts and colours can I use?

- Not all fonts display correctly on all computers?
- Some computers only display a limited set of colours?

Do I have to follow any standards?

- Does my website display correctly on all the different browsers like Internet Explorer?
- Can people with disabilities view my website correctly?

Other design considerations

There are other less important considerations that may impact on the effectiveness of your website.

Media formats

- *Do you want your site to be visible and readable on mobile phones?*

Download speeds

- Are your images and your layout elements optimised for fast downloading?

Technical stuff

If you build the website yourself or purchase a DIY template website you'll need to understand your options to make the necessary technical decisions. If you purchase a specialised template or a custom built website these decisions will often be made on your behalf. Even if the decisions are made on your behalf it helps if you know what you are getting!

Domain Names

A domain name is a human readable internet address (e.g. abaf.org.au) that is used to represent a computer's IP address (116.0.23.202) making the internet easier to navigate.

Note: Make sure you buy from a company located in Australia that can be contacted by phone as overseas domain registrars can be notoriously difficult to communicate with.

Pricing: Domain names should cost \$15 - \$40 per year.

Hosting

Each website is hosted on a type of computer called a server. Often one server hosts hundreds of separate websites. They are called servers as they serve up pages that are requested. Some things

to consider include disk space which is the amount of storage you have for email and your website; data transfer which limits the amount of activity on your account; and mailboxes which tells you how many separate email accounts you can setup. Some hosting accounts also allow you to add additional 'parked' domain names. You could have abaf.org.au and abaf.net.au both pointing to the same address.

Note: Make sure you buy from a company located in Australia and that you have access to a hosting panel so you can change setting such as your email or view web statistics.

Pricing: Hosting should cost \$100 - \$300 per year.

Static or Dynamic

Static websites are built using HTML. They are easy to setup BUT must be manually updated, which can consume huge amounts of time as the site grows. The user cannot personalise their experience of the website.

Dynamic websites are built using an active scripting language such as PHP (open source) or ASP (Microsoft). These sites usually have a secure admin site where the artist can login and make changes to the website without requiring any coding experience. Dynamic websites store all their information in databases provided as part of the hosting account.

Ecommerce

The following are important considerations when deciding whether to sell online:

How does it work and who should I use?

- Some people refer that the transaction be conducted on their site, on pages that have the same look and feel as the rest of the site. In reality the site is sending the information to a payment gateway managed by a financial institution (e.g. Westpac) but the user doesn't see this.
- A simpler, more cost effective approach is to use a payment gateway not integrated into your site, such as PayPal. You send the information and the customer away from your site while the transaction is occurring and they return once the transaction is processed.
- Also look at the charges involved. Are there upfront costs such as setting up a merchant facility and does the organisation charge you a percentage of each sale. Another important consideration is how you access and make changes to the account – is the software or control panel easy to use?

What about stock management?

- You also need to think about the stock you are selling – large or small volume. If you are selling things that will sell out quickly you may need the payment gateway to inform you of how many are sold and for that to change the stock levels on your website so that if there are zero items left the next person's time and effort is not wasted.

What approach should I take?

- In most cases you will need the services of a web designer or programmer to setup ecommerce options. This will be particularly true if you integrate your site with a financial institutions payment gateway such as Westpac. If you manage your sales through paypal or even link to stock on ebay you might be able to do this yourself depending on your level of confidence with HTML. Some website templates will provide built in ecommerce options.
- Be careful to remember postage costs. When setting up a connection to a payment solution like PayPal you will need to 'tell' them how much postage to add to the sale price.

You need to consider payment types and refunds

- What sort of payments are you willing to accept? Credit card, cheque or direct bank transfer are all options. Of course you could just load your prices to the site and ask people to transfer the money to your account – a very simple and practical approach for many small businesses.

If you use the gateway of a major financial institution then you will probably need to setup merchant facilities.

- All payment systems provide the ability to login, select a payment that has already been made and reverse that payment back to the customer if you want to provide a refund.

...as well as security and privacy

- If you are accepting personal information such as credit card details on your website then you will need a secure certificate (SSL Certificate). These certificates encrypt information that is sent from your site to the payment gateway.
- If you elect to have the transaction processed completely on another site (like PayPal) you won't need to worry about this as PayPal manage all the security implications.
- Make sure you have both a privacy policy and a terms and conditions policy for people to read somewhere on your site that indicates what information you collect (as opposed to the financial institution) and what you use it for. Have a look at the terms and conditions being used by other companies and organisations as this may give you some ideas.

Marketing

When marketing your website, you should consider a range of options starting with the quality and quantity of content placed on pages within your site.

Site Content

The most important content on your site is not visible to the public. Metadata is essentially data about data, or in this case data about your website. The metadata is contained in the code and needs to include at a minimum the *title*, *description* and *keywords*. The keywords you use in the metadata should also be used regularly in the content visible on the page. Things that can influence the ability of search engines to find and index your page include the use of images, flash and whether or not you have added metadata.

Google Services

Google have a range of free and paid services including AddURL which provide a service for submitting (with no guarantee) your website to the search engine; AdWords which is used to improve the ranking your site receives based on the amount you are willing to pay when people type in specific search terms; and webmaster tools which assist in optimising your site.

References:

The following are a small selection of web design references. AbaF would recommend you research widely before settling on a specific website.

Accessibility and web standards services

- World Wide Web Consortium www.w3c.org
- W3C Markup Validation Service www.validator.w3.org
- W3C CSS Validation Service www.jigsaw.w3.org/css-validator

Good web design

- Stylegala www.stylegala.com
- CSS Zen Garden www.csszengarden.com
- A List Apart www.alistapart.com

Specialised templates

- Artsphere www.artsphere.com.au (Independent)
- Arts Connect www.artsconnect.com.au (Directory)

Marketing

- Google AddURL www.google.com/addURL
- Google AdWords www.adwords.google.com
- Google Webmaster Tools www.google.com/webmasters/tools

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