How to write a brief for a website

You’ve been tasked with getting a new website created and you don’t know where to begin. Find out how to get started.

By Lewis North

https://www.methodandclass.com/?fade=true

If you’re reading this, the chances are that you have been given the task of writing a brief for a new website or a redesign of your old website. You’re in luck: this page will help guide you through the process. It’s not the definitive list of what you’ll need, but it’s certainly an excellent starting point, and will serve as food for thought.

We have broken this guide up into a number of stages to make it more manageable.

Please have a read of the article first and then download our template website design brief at the bottom of the page.

Introduction

The web design company will need to know a bit about your company in order to get a feel for how they should design your website. A good starting point would be to list the following:

* A couple of paragraphs about your company
* The products your sell or services you provide
* The size of the company – e.g. the number of employees, a rough turnover figure (if you want to provide it – there is a lot of difference between how a £100,000 company and a £100,000,000 company should look!)
* Are you an international company? If so, which countries?
* How long have you been established?
* Describe the company using five or ten words (e.g. young, vibrant, technology based etc.)

The old website

If you have an existing website, firstly let the web design company know the URL! (the web address) Then answer the following questions:

* What is good about the website?
* What is bad about the website? (i.e. old colour schemes, out-dated design)
* How long ago was it built? and who built it?
* What levels of traffic is it currently receiving?
* What percentage of the traffic is from smart phones & tablets?
* Which countries are your visitors from?
* What are the top 5 web browsers and platforms (Mac/PC/Android/iOS) visiting your website?
* How often do you get a genuine sales lead through the website?
* Who is responsible for updating the site?

In order to meet your requirements, any design agency would need to know why the old website is no longer suitable. So also detail anything else that could be relevant.

The new website

You must now examine [what you need from the new website](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/what-are-the-different-types-of-web-site). So, a good starting point would be to consider the following:

* Outline the aims of the website ( e.g. to increase traffic, increase product awareness, generate more sales, offer e-commerce, advertise a new product or service)
* Who is the target audience? Has this changed from the old site? What are the demographics (e.g. children, adults, social class, income levels, location, etc.)
* How will your target audience be accessing your site – [via their phones, tablets](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/responsive-web-design) or desktops?
* Is the new website part of a re-brand, or a new product launch?
* Is there other advertising taking place that the new website should tie in with?
* What are the unique selling points for your company, your products or your services?
* What industry are you aiming the website at?
* Is the market already saturated with competitors?
* List a few competitors’ websites.
* For e-commerce websites, you should detail who you bank with – this will be important for deciding on which payment gateway you should use.

Budget

[Outlining your budget](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/disclosing-your-budget) is very important. Have no doubt, you will get better, more accurate quotes in response. If all of the agencies know what the budget is and are working to the same brief, you’re likely to get very similar quotes, which is good, right? At least you can compare apples with apples.

* What is the budget for design and development of the website?
* Is there a budget for [ongoing support and maintenance](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/support-contracts---good-for-us-better-for-you)?
* What is the [digital marketing](https://www.methodandclass.com/digital-marketing-packages) budget for the next 6 months?

The look and feel of the new website

The website should be an extension of any offline media, advertising or branding that you have. It is always helpful to be provided with a brochure, some marketing literature or the annual report to help get a feel for the company, so include them with the brief.

In order to get an idea of the kind of site that you want, it is worthwhile noting three or four websites that you like – not necessarily competitors’ or sites related to your industry, just give a few example sites that you like the colour schemes of, the navigation, or the interactive elements.

The content of your new website

Start thinking about how you want to populate your new site.

Resist the urge to duplicate your [existing content](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/content-kills) in your new site – if your existing site is letting you down in some way, the chances are that the content is no longer up to scratch. Having thought about your target audience, take the opportunity to review whether your content still meets their needs.

Don’t put this off until the end of the project – start thinking now about how you’re going to produce the copy text. Do you have the resources or skills to create and supply the text to go on the website? If the answer to these questions is no, you will need a web copywriter as well – we can provide this service if necessary.

* Do you have the skills & resources available to carry out a content audit of your existing website?
* Who will be responsible for [generating content](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/what-is-content-marketing)
* Can you provide any brand guidelines (preferably incorporating details on tone of voice, phraseology etc)?
* Do you have any corporate images, photography or videos?
* Can you provide your logo & corporate identity pack? Ideally in a vector format such as .eps, .pdf or .psd?

Technical requirements

You should outline any special technical requirements that your company might have:

* Do you already own the domain?
* Will you require hosting?
* Is it an intranet/extranet or internet site?
* If it is an intranet, is it a Windows only environment?
* Are you on a Windows server or a Linux server?
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* Would you prefer to make an arrangement with the website design/ website development company for them to handle website maintenance?

Promotion

You are investing in a new website, so you want customers to see it, right? Now detail how you will promote it. An online business is no different to a traditional business it needs marketing.

Digital Marketing

The digital marketing of a website is often overlooked when considering the website brief. The promotion of your website, in terms of increasing visibility in search engines and generating a sense of engagement, is vitally important to the continued success of the site.

There are a number digital marketing activities that you should consider:

* Social media campaigns.
* Search Engine Optimisation (SEO).
* Pay-Per-Click (PPC) and Display Network adverts (image & rich media adverts on relevant websites) – paid listings you see in search engines.
* Email marketing.
* Content marketing – i.e blogs, video content, newsletters, social media.
* Banner advertising on related websites.
* Affiliate marketing

Offline promotion

A website can also be supported by an offline marketing strategy, perhaps consider some of the following activities:

* Direct mail
* Brochures and flyers
* Outdoor advertising
* PR exercises
* Sponsorship
* Vehicle wraps

You might be thinking, ‘why do they need to know about offline promotion’? This is crucial if your communications are to be consistent across various channels. The decision making process is complex, people view product and services across a variety of devices and channels, at different times of the day. You need to ensure you capture their interest and engage with them at the right time, on the right channel.

Conclusion

You should finish your website design brief with a short conclusion, outlining what you would like to receive back from the design agency. As a rule of thumb, at Method & Class we provide a full proposal, detailing how the site would be built, the layout, the costs (initial and on-going), the timescales involved and any assumptions and conditions that we have made.

Don’t forget to include timescales and be realistic; a proper proposal can take a number of days to prepare, so don’t ask for it back in 2 days time.

A template brief is available to download below – download it, fill it in and send it out.

Good luck with your website design brief and don’t forget to include us on your list of companies to tender for the development work…

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What are the different types of website?

It's about using the right tool for the job.  Websites come in many different shapes and sizes. Find out about the different kinds of websites, what’s involved and how much you should budget.

By Lewis North

Quite often we receive calls where we’re told “I need to build a website” – our first question is normally what type of website?

This article aims to discuss the types of website available and what they are suitable for.

Typically, a website falls under one of the following broad categories;

* Non-editable brochure website (often referred to as static site).
* Editable brochure website (requiring a content management system).
* Editable, dynamic website, with more user engagement (login areas etc) and self managed through a content management system.
* e-commerce site – integrated with a payment gateway such as Paypal, Stripe or banks like Barclays or HSBC.
* A progressive web application – when a website requires lots of bespoke functionality or processes it generally falls under the web application category.

Deciding on which type of site you require depends on what you actually [want the website to do](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/how-to-write-a-brief-for-a-website). If you just want a website, because you feel you should have one, a simple brochure website is all that’s required. In an ideal world, no website should ever be completely static and not change, but you have to be realistic what’s achievable with your resources.

Brochure websites – static or content managed

A brochure website is quite often an online extension of your sales collateral; outlining the who, what & where of your business. It is how most organisations start out on the web. For some, a simple online brochure that rarely changes is enough. However, most small businesses at least require the option to add and edit their own news articles. In these situations, a simple tool like [Perch](http://www.grabaperch.com/) is ideal. This allows the maximum of creativity, with the added option of making some elements of the page editable. Our own website is built on Perch.

Most of the [website briefs](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/how-to-write-a-brief-for-a-website) or requests for a proposals that we receive spec a full content management system (CMS). In reality, most organisations don’t actually use the full capabilities of the CMS, only ever updating their news and staff pages. So, as mentioned earlier, be sure that you have the resources available before you start down the ‘full CMS’ path.

What is a content management system?

A Content Management System (CMS) is a web-based tool to allow any authorised user access to edit the website. The idea behind a CMS is that day-to-day maintenance is handled by the client who, typically, has no prior experience in web page programming. By using modern programming languages and WYSIWYG (pronounced ‘wizzy wig’ – meaning ‘What You See Is What You Get’) editors look and work in a similar way to Microsoft Word, but convert the content in HTML (the language of the web). None of them are perfect, but they certainly make it easier & quicker to publish to your website.

We find that people who are proficient in Word can easily work a CMS and have the ability to create new content, add content, insert images and basically control what is in the website.

Most CMSs will store the content of the web page in a database table, meaning it’s searchable and can have various meta data attached to it. It also means that you can have various version of the same page (for example, the live version, older versions and perhaps a new version that is not yet complete.) This makes a CMS a very powerful tool for managing the site content.

Fully functioning content management systems come in many different guises, thankfully, there are now some excellent off-the-shelf options available. Some of them are free to use, such as [Wordpress](https://wordpress.org/) and some require the purchase of a license, such as [Craft](https://craftcms.com/) (our preferred choice).

As a word of advice, if you don’t need particularly bespoke functionality try and stick to using a popular, reliable CMS. There is little point building a completely bespoke CMS just to add, edit and delete pages, news and blog posts. It simply isn’t necessary anymore. In addition, most of the mainstream CMSs have thousands of plugins available that will facilitate all manor of things, such as animated banner photos, photo galleries, dynamic (editable) contact forms etc. Don’t try and re-create the wheel unless you have to.

e-commerce

The e-commerce platform has been produced thousands of times, it’s been refined, improved upon and extended. As with the content management systems, there are many excellent e-commerce platforms available. Ranging from the cheap and easy to setup hosted options like [Shopify](https://shopify.com/) through to the more advanced [Magento](https://magentocommerce.com/).

When deciding which approach to take, be clear about your requirements. How many product lines, how many variants of a each product, do you need to integrate it with a fulfilment house? Which payment gateway do you want to use? (If you’re not sure, compare them here: [Payment Brain](http://paymentbrain.co.uk/)) All of these decisions will influence the approach you need to take.

e-commerce websites demand a lot more attention than a normal brochure website. You simply can not build it and expect to see orders come rolling in, it isn’t like that. So be prepared to market the business and work hard to gain traction in your market.

A good tip for e-commerce sites is to learn from the masters. Online giants like [ASOS](http://asos.com/) invest millions into their online strategy, why not piggyback a few ideas from them? So take a look at their website, both on your smart phone and desktop PC to see how they are presenting their products and organising their site.

What is a progressive web application?

If you need to do more than just host information about your organisation or collect user contact forms you are probably looking at a web application. Effectively, we can build a web application to do any job you require. We can build systems to access complex database, manage offline subscriptions through an online interface and anything else you can dream of.

We develop web applications using the Laravel framework.  This is a bit like the foundations of which you build the application on.  A set of guiding principles, if you like.  Normally progressive web applications will integrate and engage with other web services and platforms through APIs (Application Programming Interfaces) - these are standardised ways of transmitting data backwards and forwards.  By doing this you can integrate services from a variety of suppliers to work together to create your own application, product or service.

To give you an example, we have developed the Doctor Pulse application to integrate with TokBox for facilitating the video calls, Interfax to send prescriptions to pharmacies, Amazon for encryption, Twilio for Sending SMS messages and authenticating users.  All of these integrations work together to form the Doctor Pulse platform.

How much should you budget?

It’s quite normal for the [budget](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/disclosing-your-budget) available to be a major factor in the approach taken. In very broad terms, the following figures are a good indication of the typical budget required for each approach. Please note, this is all for bespoke design and not template based websites.

* Brochure websites with or without a simple CMS £5,000 – £15,000
* A more complex CMS can be in the range £15,000 – £45,000
* eCommerce ranges from £20,000 – £50,000+
* Web applications range from £15,000 – £100,000+

This would include things such as;

* Project management, planning & meetings
* User interface and user experience planning
* Bespoke design
* Setup and installation of any software
* Development
* Implementation

In addition to the above you might also require assistance with:

* Content strategy – (find out more: [Content kills](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/content-kills) )
* Training
* Web strategy
* Social media strategy
* Search engine optimisation
* Digital marketing strategy
* Hosting

Obviously there are other ways you can do things and there normally is a solution for every budget, but you will just need to compromise and do more yourself when the budget is smaller.

Decided what you need?

If you think you have a good idea what type of website you need, the next step is to [prepare a website brief](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/how-to-write-a-brief-for-a-web-site)

7 tips for website owners

A few simple tips to help you get the best out of your investment and maximise your organisation’s digital strategy. If you want a good digital presence you need to put the hours in, find out where to begin.

By Lewis North

So you’ve got a website or you’re [thinking of creating a website](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/how-to-write-a-brief-for-a-website)? What are the top tips we can give you to ensure your website is a long term success?

1. Be clear on what you want and what you need

First things first – [what is your website for?](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/what-are-the-different-types-of-website) Be clear on what you want your website to deliver. What are your objectives? How is it going to help your business? How are you going to measure the benefits? This is basic stuff, but keep challenging yourself with these simple questions, even once the website is established.

2. Plan, plan and plan some more

Building a well constructed, targeted, information rich and SEO focussed website takes a lot of time, effort and ultimately money. As the website guardian, it is your job to ensure that all your long term targets and objectives are met, that improvements and fixes are implemented quickly and that the whole system is meeting or exceeding expectations.

With larger e-commerce projects and bespoke web applications the importance of planning increases exponentially. The website will be interacting with more internal systems, encroaching on other departments remits and generally throwing it’s weight around more. The importance of planned introductions and improvements can not be underestimated. Knee jerk reactions to implement a new piece of functionality often causes more problems than leaving things alone.

It is worthwhile investing in a suitable project management solution – be that offline like MS Project/OmniOutliner or online like Basecamp – these systems will help you to plan your workloads, timescales and delivery dates more accurately.

Write a full and detailed [website spec](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/how-to-write-a-brief-for-a-website). There are a many reasons for doing this, but the two main ones are that it ensures you get what you want and that deliverables are set and agreed by all parties. It it will also help you to think about all the nuances of your project – for want of a better phrase, it will get the creative juices flowing. Quite often, it’s only when writing the full website spec do you realise, ‘Oh, actually I need it to handle the lack of VAT on international exports’ etc. Writing a spec is a good thing and will result in a happy website owner/developer relationship.

3. Preparing copy and photographs takes time

Your website content should not be an after thought. At Method & Class we consider the content right at the start of the web project, and this forms an integral part of our design process, influencing the look and feel, the functionality and the structure and navigation. So if you work with us you won’t get away with leaving you copy to the last minute!

We are of the strong belief that content can make or break a website. Creating interesting and well written copy is a skill. If you don’t have the skill or time to dedicate to doing this properly, pay a professional to do it for you. This is often an area that customers think they can cut some costs and do themselves – and more often than not it’s very evident in the final result. Copywriters aren’t hugely expensive and they will do a better job than you will! Similarly good photography is essential to a good website. Instead of using the camera on your mobile phone, pay for a professional to come and take some pictures. This is particularly important if it’s product photography or location focused.

4. Make friends with search engines

A lot has changed in approaches to [search engine optimisation](https://www.methodandclass.com/digital-marketing-packages) (SEO) in recent years. The tide has turned (thankfully) against reams of keyword-laden nonsense cluttering our websites, and Google has got wise to artificial back links. So what can you do? SEO remains something of a dark art, and if you’re serious about it, you’ll want to have a separate SEObudget and engage a creditable expert to help you with a dedicated strategy. However, there are some simple things you can do to help yourself:

* Make sure your house is in order. Search engines like clear, clean structures with proper and relevant page titles.
* Love your content. Common sense really, but if your [content](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/what-is-content-marketing) is interesting and useful, people will want to read it.
* Collaborate. Paying an agency to engineer hundreds or thousands of artificial back links from made up sites might actually hurt your page ranking, but good quality organic links are still the best way to improve your standing with search engines. Easier said than done? Maybe, but start with forging links with other related businesses. Don’t operate in a silo – contribute to other sites, make sure your social media presence sign posts back to your main site, name check other companies and they’ll soon reciprocate.

5. Keep it fresh

The initial build of a website is exciting and takes up a lot of resources.  However you mustn’t forget that this is now your mouthpiece to the world – you need to keep the momentum up and the new content flowing. Not only for search engine purposes but also to keep your customers coming back to you. They will be interested to see what you’re working on, what new products or services you’re offering and how you can help them improve/expand/reach more customers. So consider it your job to ensure that content is added monthly as an absolute minimum – it will be worth the effort in the long run.

6. Nothing lasts forever

Almost everything has a shelf life, particularly in the rapidly changing digital age, where technological advances mean improvements can be made quickly and with sweeping effect. So you need to consider that your website will have a shelf life. What is possible now will be different in 3 years time. What is all the rage now will be old hat soon. You need to continually evolve to stay with the pack. It is worthwhile bearing in mind that websites typically have a life cycle of between 3 and 5 years.

7. Don’t lose touch with your web agency

As we’ve covered, the world of the web moves quickly. Even industry veterans struggle to keep up with the latest advancements. That’s what makes it so exciting! (We warned you we were mega geeks – right?) However, unless you live and breathe the web, the chances are there are all kinds of improvements or regulatory updates that might have passed you by. If you have a relationship with a good web agency, they’ll consider it their responsibility to keep you in the loop. So if you get the odd invite to a catch up meeting, phone message asking for a chat, don’t just assume that your web agency is trying to squeeze more money out of you. As a rule we’re a friendly bunch and we like to share – we might just have stumbled across a nifty little widget that would be just the thing for your site. So pick up the phone – who knows what we might have up our sleeve!

Good luck, and if you need any help, [please give us a ring](https://www.methodandclass.com/contact-us).

Disclosing your budget

Reasons why a budget is a good thing and why you shouldn’t be worried about disclosing it. Despite what you might think, it will probably mean you get more for your money and ultimately, you’ll get a better end product. Time to start comparing apples with apples…

By Lewis North

Reasons why a budget is a good thing and why you shouldn’t be worried about disclosing it.

We are regularly involved in the [pitch process](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/how-to-give-and-receive-feedback-constructively), so we know what goes into preparing proposals and [recommendations for a web project](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/7-tips-for-web-site-owners). If the project budget is not outlined from the outset, it’s just guesswork trying to establish the best solution for that company or individual. To quote the old adage, ‘There are many ways to skin a cat’. Likewise, [there are many ways to build a web site](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/what-are-the-different-types-of-web-site). We always say that there is a solution for every budget and we genuinely believe that. However, what you want to achieve and how you achieve it is often dictated by your budget.

How does knowing the budget help?

It’s quite simple – if we know what your budget is, along with your business requirements, we can work out the best solution for you. There is little point in us working out a solution aimed at a £15,000 budget if you only have £5,000 available. It just saves wasted effort and puts all of the companies involved in your RFP (Request For Proposal) on a level playing field. It’s quite frustrating to find out that the custom-built ecommerce solution you have presented is overkill because the client only has a small budget and would be better of with an eBay shop! When the budget is smaller, we would suggest working smarter, not harder. So, for example, use tools readily available for some of the site’s functionality. We suggest things like:

* [Google maps](https://maps.google.com/) API for showing the locations of items or people.
* [Flickr](https://www.flickr.com/) to manage your photographs and integrate it into the site as an RSS feed.
* [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/) or [Vimeo](https://vimeo.com/) for managing your site video content.
* Basecamp for managing your clients’ area. We can build bespoke alternatives to all of these tools but they obviously take time to develop and cost money. If the budget is tight and compromises can be made, the available tools are usually more than capable of doing the job.

A set budget means keener quotes

As a customer, you want to get the best price possible, and so you should. We understand why you would want to keep your budgetary cards close to your chest, however it doesn’t always work in your favour. By not giving a defined budget you will probably end up with a veritable cross section of quotes from the companies involved, as each one suggests a different solution. It’s simple economics really; each company involved is likely to charge similar amounts for similar things as we are likely to have a similar hourly rate and similar overheads. By defining your budget, you are more likely to get similar proposals and suggestions for the work required, meaning you can concentrate on establishing which is the best solution for you, not just the cheapest one.

Won’t you just quote for the whole budget?

In some cases, yes, we would aim to build you a solution that meets your budget. In others, we recognise that you need some of that budget for other things. For example, in the case of a new website, with a new domain name, you will need some of that budget for [digital marketing](https://www.methodandclass.com/digital-marketing-packages). There is no point in spending your entire budget on the web site if no one can find it for 6 months! Why not spend less on the website and put some money aside for [pay-per-click](https://www.methodandclass.com/digital-marketing-packages) advertising, some paid-for submission directories or perhaps some [SEO](https://www.methodandclass.com/digital-marketing-packages) work to obtain back links? We believe in providing itemised, transparent, costed proposals, so you can see how much your core functionality will cost, and what, if any, are the optional extras.

Consultants

We want to give you the best solution we can – the solution that maximises your return in investment and ultimately brings you the most business. If that means saving money in one place to allow you to spend in another, then so be it. We consider ourselves to be consultants on your project, not just the company commissioned to design and develop the web site for you.

P.S. Don’t forget to mention if VAT should be included in your budget or not!

Responsive website design

The impact of smart phones and tablet devices cannot be ignored. With mobile browsing set to overtake desktop in the near future, the time to start preparing is now. Find out what responsive web design is and why you need it on your next project.

By Lewis North

We are living in changing times, my friends. The most dramatic change in the web in recent years has been the impact of smart phones and tablets. The mobile web is simply too large to ignore. It’s often cited that mobile web usage will overtake desktop usage as soon as 2014. It is for this reasons that you should be gearing up for the mobile web now. There are several different trains of thought on how you should handle this:

* Don’t do anything, the browsers are so good on smartphones they can read normal web sites
* Create apps (one for each mobile platform Apple, Blackberry, Android, Windows)
* Creative a responsive web site

Many organizations want to be able to say they have their own app. Whilst we do build mobile applications, our recommendation to many of our clients is to make the [web site responsive](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/what-are-the-different-types-of-web-site) instead of building an app. This basically means that web site can interpret what type of device is looking at it, based on the size of the screen and can react accordingly. Simply put, it’s possible to make the web site re-organize itself based upon the orientation and screen size of the device looking at it – some elements are hidden, some are displayed and others are simplified depending on the device. The days of the web site looking the same on all devices are over.

Of course, if you really feel that a dedicated app is key to your company’s digital offering we can build it for you. But our suggestion is to carefully plan what goes into this app. Is it a brochure app, targeting prospective customers? Or is it a functional app that draws in the company’s news and events and has editable content? Perhaps a mixture of the two? Do you focus on iOS and Android only or also include Windows & Blackberry?

Creating a [responsive web site](https://www.methodandclass.com/article/what-are-the-different-types-of-web-site) does add to the design and development time to a web site project, which ultimately leads to more cost, but we firmly believe that you should adopt this approach to the design of your web site. In some respects it’s still a fairly new approach, but have no doubt: it is the future of web design and will deliver a better experience to your users. Furthermore, the cost is much less than creating a dedicated native app for each mobile platform.

Check out [our work](https://www.methodandclass.com/portfolio) for some of our recent responsive designs.