Inbound Marketing's

MOST WANTED

33 Website Design Crimes to Avoid at All Costs

SmartBug
MEDIA

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INTRODUCTION

Today, a website is the external representation of a company to potential customers and the world in general, so it makes sense that many businesses invest time, energy, and budget in making their sites look and work as good as possible.

Unfortunately, even with the best intentions, many designs and redesigns still result in the kinds of website design crimes that could land an otherwise-savvy inbound marketer in design jail. These mistakes can cripple conversion rates, annoy visitors, and generally make your brand look silly.

In this e-book, we've outlined 33 of the greatest design crimes that marketers are prone to committing:

When planning a website design

In the execution phase on homepages, internal pages, and landing pages

After a new site goes live

Have you committed design crimes? Need someone to bail you out? Read on for your website design "Get Out of Jail Free" card.

CRIMES IN PLANNING

They say, "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail." True for life in general, this adage is worth taking seriously when designing a website. Although planning may not be the most exciting part of the Web design process, it is essential to creating a website that attracts visitors, converts them into leads, and supplies the information that helps your sales team close business.

**When planning a website design or redesign,
here are the crimes that will surely land you in design jail:**

NEGLECTING TO RECORD BENCHMARKS

Before you rip apart a website for a redesign, record its current benchmarks. Assuming you have some form of tracking on your website (Google Analytics, marketing software, and so on), you should record:

Average monthly visits

Record-high monthly visits

Average monthly leads

Record-high monthly leads

Top sources bringing traffic to the site (organic search, direct traffic, paid channels, social media, and so on)

Most visited pages

Least visited pages

With these data points recorded, you can adequately measure your new site's performance against the old.

2 DESIGNING WITHOUT A GOAL IN MIND

So, you're redesigning your website. There's a reason for that, right? Maybe you want to attract more of the right kind of visitors, generate more leads, announce a new product or service, or introduce new messaging. If you are designing your website "just because," with no goal in mind, there's no way to measure your success.

Once you have a general goal, such as attracting more visitors, make it as specific as possible. Would you like to increase visits from a specific source? By a certain amount? Within a defined time period? What mini-milestones will you recognize along the way?

A properly set goal from the start is a powerful guiding principle throughout the design process.

3 FAILURE TO IDENTIFY THE AUDIENCE

To communicate effectively, you must understand the audience with whom you're speaking. If you fail to identify your audience at the onset of the design, you're likely to face big problems trying to move forward with content and imagery.

In inbound marketing, the audience is identified through the process of creating buyer personas. Buyer personas are semi-fictional, archetypical representations of ideal customers. You can develop them by working with internal sales and service teams, in addition to conducting interviews with customers.

4 REFUSAL TO ESTABLISH PAGE STRUCTURE

Before a line of code is touched, an image selected, or sentence written, you must plan how your website will work. After your homepage, what should visitors do? Where should they go? What information do your buyers need to move through their journey? If you refuse to define the overall structure of your website, you're likely to create a fractured user experience that can stand in the way of achieving goals.

5 FAILURE TO CONSIDER MOBILE

With proper planning, incorporating mobile-friendly design into your new site is easy. But if you fail to plan for it before site production begins, making changes to accommodate mobile devices can be costly and time-consuming. With Google now issuing a penalty (in the form of dropped rankings) to sites that aren't mobile-friendly, this is one crime that can lead to quick sentencing. In the past, companies have created full-on "mobile websites" that represented completely different experiences from their "regular" site. As visitors have shifted toward using mobile devices to explore websites, the trend has evolved from mobile-exclusive sites to responsive design, in which pages automatically resize to accommodate different screen sizes.

To take mobile optimization further, consider a content management system that allows you to display different content to visitors on different devices. For example, shorter forms on landing pages or slightly abridged content for mobile users who don't wait their screen filled with piles of text.

> **"if you fail to plan for it before site production begins, making changes to accommodate mobile devices can be costly and time-consuming."**

6 FAILURE TO RECOGNIZE WHEN TO WORK WITH A PROFESSIONAL

Though some projects can be completely in-house, others should be handed to professionals. The scope of the project, your team's skill level, and the time you have to complete Web design are all important factors for determining if you should call a professional. A professional design team can help you avoid all the website design crimes listed above and in the next sections of this guide.

CRIMES IN EXECUTION

Even with planning in place, execution is the stage with the greatest potential for committing website design crimes. These offenses are also the most visible and apparent to website visitors and potential customers and can be committed on your homepage, internal pages, and even landing pages.

HOMEPAGE CRIMES

Your homepage is the online equivalent of a business's front door. What visitors see—or don't see—when they view your homepage can define how they interact with the rest of your site. It can even turn them off completely. Committing the following homepage design crimes sets you up for failure.

7   INCLUSION OF A SPLASH PAGE AS A HOMEPAGE

When visitors reach your website, they should reach your website—not a splash page. In most cases, showing a page before the homepage is unnecessary. It creates an extra step for visitors without providing them helpful information. Whenever possible, instead of adding a splash page, use your homepage to gather information you need and move buyers through their journey. For example, if your product has separate commercial and consumer applications, include a call to action for each persona on the homepage itself.

FAILURE TO CLEARLY DEFINE VALUE PROPOSITION

When visitors land on a page of your website, you have 3-5 seconds to capture their attention. If you fail to do so, visitors are quick to hit the back button and navigate to someone else's site. This is commonly called the "Blink Test," as you effectively have to get visitors to understand what you do by the time they blink.

Your homepage should clearly define what your business does and the value your company offers to customers. Summarize your value proposition as succinctly as possible, and display it prominently on the homepage so visitors know what you do and why it solves their problems. Remember, your homepage is not about you—it's about your customers.

9 NEGLECTING TO REMOVE CLUTTER

The homepages of yesteryear were packed solid with blocks of text, small images, and abundant calls to action. They were often cluttered and unfocused, with no clear path for visitors to follow. In time, marketers found that these busy homepages confuse visitors. When the clutter is removed, visitors can actually absorb the information your company provides and understand how you solve their problems. Keeping the clutter at bay helps visitors identify what steps to take next.

10 LACK OF RELEVANT IMAGERY

The photos, icons, and other imagery you choose for your site should be relevant to your message and your personas. A candid photo of the design process for a fashion brand? Perfect. A stock photo of generic office workers around a conference table? Irrelevant. If there is nothing to gain from the image you plan to use, it is not the right image. Images are powerful; they can explain a process, humanize your brand, showcase products, and keep visitors on your website longer. On your homepage, the right images will draw visitors in and help you pass the Blink Test, thus keeping them engaged with your content longer.

> **" When the clutter is removed, visitors can actually absorb the information your company provides and understand how you solve their problems. "**

11 FAILURE TO INCLUDE CALLS TO ACTION THAT ALIGN WITH THE BUYER'S JOURNEY

Kissmetrics found that 96 percent of website visitors are not ready to buy. That means if your only homepage call to action is "buy now," you should expect to convert few visitors into leads and customers. Instead, include calls to action for each stage of the buyer's journey. Your navigation may include a "buy now" CTA; your main page header a "Request a Demo" button; and further down the page, links to additional resources such as e-books, your blog, and case studies. This way, every visitor has a conversion opportunity that aligns with their stage in the journey, whether they are just starting their research, are comparing solutions, or are ready to purchase.

12 LACK OF CLEAR NAVIGATION

Website visitors have some expectations of what a site looks like and how they should interact with it. Navigation is one of those expectations. Though there are no set rules for navigation, visitors should easily see where they can learn about your products and services, find out more about your company, and access your resources. Users expect to see navigation at the top of every site page (except landing pages, which we'll cover later). If your site does not include navigation and visitors do not know where they should go next, they are likely to leave your site in favor of one that is easier for them to use.

13 LACK OF LOGICAL USER PATH

Your homepage is not a scavenger hunt. I repeat: Your homepage is not a scavenger hunt! Don't make users hunt around for what they need next—deliver it to them. If you're stating your value to visitors, the logical next step is to learn more about your solution, so ask visitors to request a demo or consultation and give them a link to learn more about your products or services.

If you're discussing a newly launched product on your homepage, provide a link to download spec sheets, to read a case study about a customer using that product, or to a call to action to purchase the product (or get a quote). The Blink Test still applies: Even if visitors know what you do in 2 seconds, if it takes more than 5 seconds to figure out where to go next, you've lost them.

14 EXCESSIVE USE OF SLIDERS

Once fashionable, the inclusion of sliders (other aliases: carousel, rotator, gallery) on homepages has been largely abandoned because they're not particularly good for search engine optimization or the user experience. Research from Search Engine Land shows that fewer than 1 percent of website visitors will click a link in a slider. Also, sliders frequently cause slow load times, especially on mobile devices. They're big, flashy content pieces that command a lot of visual attention but don't improve engagement. Avoid them.

15 USE OF AUTO-PLAYING MEDIA

Your ideal customer searches online for a solution to his or her problem and ends up on your website. Suddenly, the video on your site's homepage starts blaring music. The visitor, having now disturbed an office full of colleagues, panics, hits the back button, and vows never to visit your website again. Ouch.

Unfortunately, the above situation is all too common. If a video is good, an auto-playing video is better, right? Wrong. Not all visitors want to watch video. The big play button that video hosting sites include on top of an embedded video is call to action enough for visitors who are interested in watching. Likewise, you should not include music or other sounds that autoplay. Like sparkling GIFs and the serif-font Google Logos of history, auto-playing media should be a thing of the past in Web design.

> "
> If a video is good, an auto-playing video is better, right? Wrong. Not all visitors want to watch video.
> "

INTERNAL PAGE CRIMES

16 EXCESSIVE USE OF FIRST PERSON

"I," "we," "us," and "ours" are great words to use when you're narrating a story, but they might not be the best choice for your internal page content. Remember, though it is yours, your website is not about you—it's about your customers and solving their problems. When designing your website, don't tell visitors what you do; show them how your solution solves their problems, preferably in the second person by saying "you" and "your."

17 LACK OF SCANNABLE CONTENT

Your font is too small. You've chosen a light gray background with white text. There are no headers on the page. The internal page is a literal wall of text. These are all examples of internal site pages that lack scannable content. If your internal pages include any of them, it's time to revisit how you're presenting information. Most site visitors aren't going to read the paragraphs of text you've included; they are much more likely to scan down the page, reading headers, subheaders, and the first sentence or two of a paragraph.
This means you absolutely must have a legible font that contrasts with the background color of the page or section it's in. Headers should stand out from text. Instead of long paragraphs and purple prose, get to the point and include separate, shorter paragraphs.

Even without reading thoroughly, a visitor should have the general idea of what a page is about and know the next step to take.

18 INCLUSION OF SIDEBAR CALLS TO ACTION NOT RELEVANT TO PAGE CONTENT

So your website template has a sidebar widget where you want to include a call to action. A sidebar is a great place for a CTA, but only if it's relevant to the information on the page. If the internal page is explaining your summer landscaping services, but the sidebar includes an e-book about selecting the right snow plowing company, the CTA is not relevant and you are unlikely to see a good conversion rate on that page. Instead of using a global sidebar across your entire site, change your sidebar on different pages or categories.

19   USE OF GARISH CALLS TO ACTION

It's true: Your calls to action should stand out. However, if they're totally garish and clash with the rest of your website, they definitely cheapen the look of your site. Instead of randomly selecting colors that make your website look like a traffic sign, be smart about coordinating colors. A site such as design-seeds.com (or a professional design team) can help you see how colors coordinate with your existing logo.

20   LACK OF LOGICAL PATH

If it's important on your homepage, it's extra important on internal pages: You must show visitors what they need to do next. Too often, internal pages consist of a sidebar and a block of copy—and that's it. Instead of cutting off the page, think about what visitors need next. You might consider including:

| A link to a demo, on-demand (prerecorded demo), or consultation | "Buy now" links for ecommerce sites | A related, prerecorded webinar | A related e-book, guide, or white paper | Relevant case studies |

These items give your visitor a logical next step to take, thus keeping them on your site and engaged with your content. Logic must govern the path you create for visitors. Sending them to a random section of your website instead of a "logical next step" is a crime equal to not having a path at all for users to take. If you plan well, avoiding this misdemeanor should be a breeze.

21 FAILURE TO USE BULLET POINTS

When writing online, bullet points are your friend. They are so helpful, in fact, that not using them constitutes its own design crime (separate from No. 17: lack of scannable content). When we read, we're trained to skip around and pull out the most important information. When you add a bulleted or numbered list, it's a big signal to readers of the most important information on the page. Bullets visually grab the visitor's attention and keep it, thus giving you a huge opportunity.

22 FORGETTING THE CTA

Please, please, please don't forget the call to action on internal pages. Even if you're including a sidebar CTA, your best chance for conversions is to call users to action while they are reading page content. You can be bold with buttons or subtle with links in the copy; use images or stick to text. Just don't forget that CTA.

Website Notes

- must use bullet p
- remember the C
- relevant sidebar

LANDING PAGE CRIMES

23 INCLUDING MULTIPLE CALLS TO ACTION

The purpose of a landing page is simple: to convert a visitor into a lead. To that end, your landing page should be simple. It should present your offer, explain its value, and direct visitors to complete a form. If you're asking visitors to watch a video, read six testimonials, and then fill out the form, you're in serious trouble. Having multiple calls to action does not support the actual purpose of the page.

CLICK HERE TO VIEW

CLICK HERE TO VIE

CLICK HERE TO VIEW

CLICK HERE TO VIEW

24 FAILURE TO SHOW THE VISITOR WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE OFFER

"If I give you my precious email address, what am I getting in return? What value does it offer me?" These are the questions that your landing page visitors are asking—be sure to answer them. Your headlines and copy should make it clear, but you should also include actual images of an offer whenever possible. If it's an e-book, show the cover. Webinar? Add a screenshot. Consultation? Show visitors the report they'll receive at the end. Manage expectations by being as specific as possible and you'll have satisfied new leads.

> **In fact, because landing pages are asking visitors to divulge personal information via form submission, they should be some of the most clearly written pages of your site.**

25 FAILURE TO UPDATE BUTTON TEXT

At the end of your Web form, there lives a little button that users click to submit their information. This button usually says "Submit". This button can usually be changed to say just about anything—so change it. Visitors can "Download Now,", "Access the Webinar," "Request a Demo," or complete any other action that starts with an action. Verbs are exciting and, when customized for form buttons, reinforce the goal of your page.

26 REFUSAL TO INCORPORATE HEADLINES

The copy on landing pages should be simple, but that doesn't mean it should be scannable like other site pages. In fact, because landing pages are asking visitors to divulge personal information via form submission, they should be some of the most clearly written pages of your site. A compelling headline and subheadings in the copy are important in establishing that clarity and scannability. Without them, visitors are looking at too many words that they are unlikely to read.

27 INCLUDING A FORM THAT IS TOO LONG

As a rule, forms on landing pages should ask as many questions as are necessary for qualifying a prospect. This varies from business to business and offer to offer, but forms with fewer fields are quicker and easier for visitors to c omplete, so conversion rates on pages with shorter forms tend to be higher.

If you need to add more questions than you think is advisable, here are two options:

Use **Smart Forms** that allow you to queue additional questions to ask users when they've already completed a form. For example, if a lead has already told you the name of the company he or she works for, instead of asking for it again, you can ask for a job title.

Use **Dependent Fields** that answer new questions based on a response. For example, if you ask what country a lead is from, you can choose to ask only U.S.-based leads what state they're from. This way, you're not asking questions that aren't relevant to the lead.

## 28 INCLUDING A CHEESY STOCK PHOTO

Stock photo sites seem to be filled with images of overly happy men and women in suits, smiling at the camera while sitting in front of mountains of paperwork or watching presentations. These photos are a prime example of the concept, "Just because someone sells it, that doesn't mean you should buy it." If you're using part of your website design budget for stock photos, make sure you're choosing realistic, engaging images. For landing pages, a cheesy stock photo can be the kiss of death: Instead of making your content look trustworthy and valuable, it looks suspicious and amateur.

29 ADDING NAVIGATION

Crime 12 explained why it's important to always have clear navigation, but Crime 29 is the exception to that rule. Your landing pages with forms for lead generation should never have navigation because it gives your visitor the opportunity to click away from the offer.

If visitors don't complete your form, you don't collect their contact information. Be sure to have a landing page template that does not include your regular navigation bar so you can quickly build high-performing landing pages for the offers you've spent so much time writing.
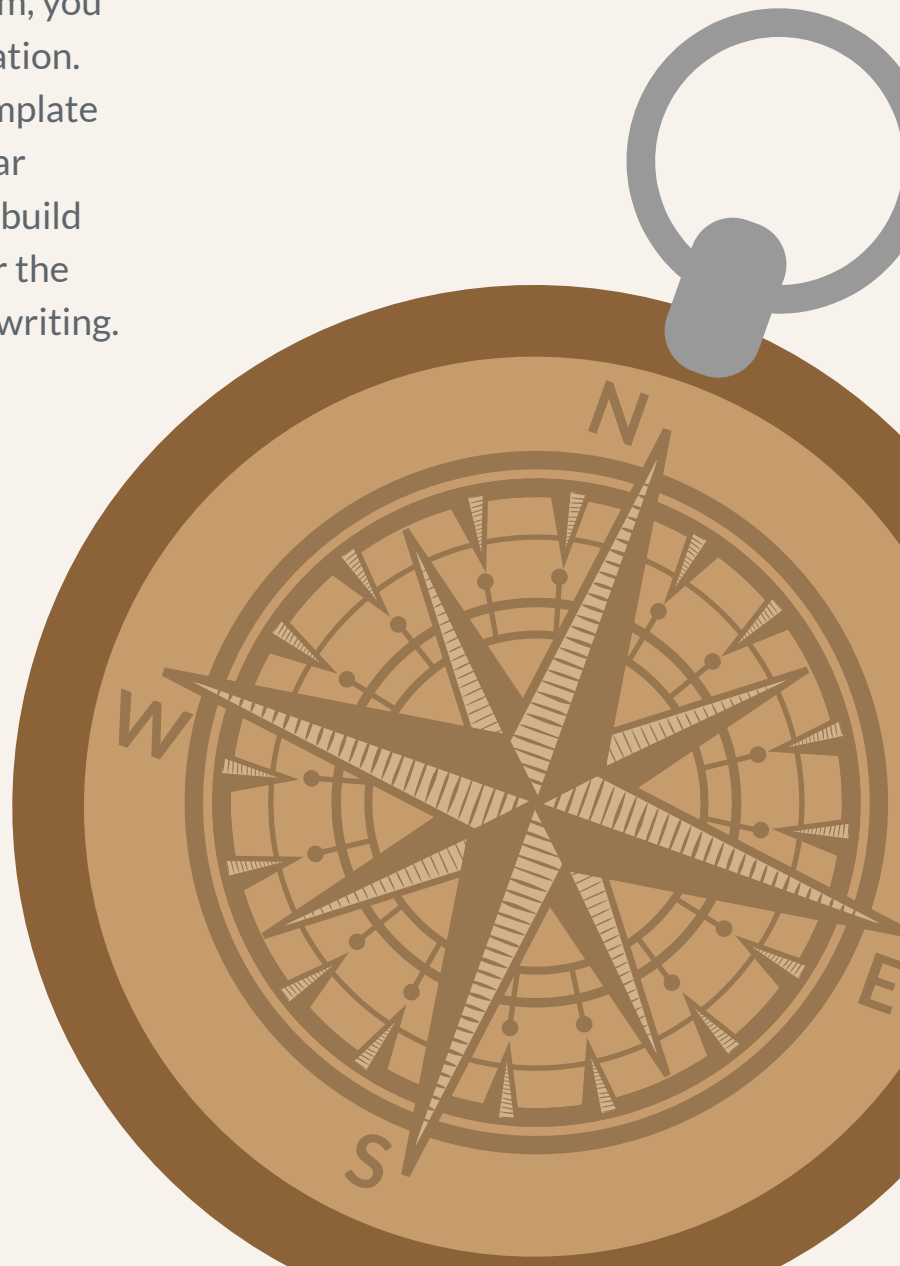
POST-LAUNCH CRIMES

After your website goes live, the design process doesn't stop, and there are still many crimes that marketers across the globe are prone to commit.

Here are the crimes you're at risk for after your launch:

30 FORGETTING TO ADD ANALYTICS

You took your benchmarks, planned, and made it through the design process to launch. And then you forgot to add tracking codes from Google Analytics and your marketing software. Whenever you make big changes to your site, always, always, always make sure you've added your tracking codes back in. Without tracking information, how will you measure website success?

31 FAILURE TO TIE UP THE LOOSE ENDS

There are always a few items in a website design that are designed to be updated or finalized after launch. If you've reorganized your page structure, you'll need to add 301 redirects that let search engines know a page has moved and ensure a seamless user experience. Still, you may encounter 404 or "page not found" errors that you will need to correct. Remember that the work isn't quite done—you still need to monitor the site and measure performance to tie up those changes.

32 NEGLECTING TO COMPARE NEW SITE TO OLD BENCHMARKS

Your new site is launched and you love it, but is it helping you reach your goals? Because you benchmarked your old site for posterity, make sure you use that data to compare new site performance. Are your visitors spending more time on the site? Viewing more pages? Converting at a higher rate? As marketers, we collect data to use it to inform our decisions—and not just for fun.

33 FINISHING YOUR WEBSITE

A good website is never finished: There is always something to be updated or optimized. Call-to-action buttons must be revisited to receive more clicks. Forms on landing pages need to be altered to supply the sales team with appropriate information. Products are discontinued; services are added. Your website is a living entity, not a finished product, that should change and evolve over time.

> " Remember that the work isn't quite done —you still need to monitor the site and measure performance to tie up those changes. "

STUCK IN DESIGN JAIL?

If you've committed any of these design crimes and think your website should be performing better, fear not: The SmartBug Media team is here to bail you out. With Web design on the HubSpot website platform, you're guaranteed to launch a site that follows all of these best practices.

Learn more about SmartBug's Web design process and request a consultation today.

Request a free consultation

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Juli is an Senior Consultant for SmartBug Media. She has four years of experience as an in-house inbound marketer using HubSpot. She's a graduate of Rutgers University where she studied Anthropology and perfected her people watching skills which in turn makes her marketing people-centric.

ABOUT SMARTBUG MEDIA

SmartBug Media is one of only six HubSpot Diamond partners in the world and is the highest rated agency in the history of the HubSpot ecosystem. We also boast the highest ROI documented from any HubSpot partner -- 3,558% and 14,500% ROI on a six-month and three-year campaign.

For more than seven years, SmartBug Media has been helping businesses increase sales leads, close more customers and enhance the reach of their brands. From building comprehensive online marketing programs to designing new websites, driving leads through social media or sales enablement, we're an extension of your marketing team that delivers.

For a free inbound marketing or web design consultation, or to learn more, visit http://www.smartbugmedia.com/ or call 949-236-6448.