



# Planning for your new web site

# Snoop around

## Check out your competition

Looking around the web at other sites is probably the most important part of the process. It is usually a good idea to browse your competition. This is especially important if many of your competitors are located nearby. You will be attracting the same customer base and it can be a challenge since we all know everyone judges a book by it's cover.

Before the internet we did a lot of window shopping as we strolled along main street or in the mall. Browsing the internet is the virtual equivalent of window shopping, which is exactly what your customers are doing! If your window looks inviting, your customer will come on in. If not, they go to the next store. Nothing has really changed, only the way we window shop.



Take notes and even do a screen capture of the sites you like (Windows Print Screen Button; Mac Utilities Folder > Grab). Paste the screen capture into a document and add your notes. You may want to pay special attention to the sites that use a color scheme similar to what you have in mind. Your color scheme will need to complement your company logo so be mindful of that.

### Important considerations

Content	Style	Organization
Does it answer the visitor's questions?	Is it visually appealing?	Are the menus easy to find?
Is it meaningful?	Is there a good balance of visual and textual information?	Can you sense the flow of information throughout a page or the site?
Does the writing style get to the point and easy to understand?	How are colors used?	When you click a menu does the linked page present what you anticipated?
How much is placed on any given page?	Does it look appealing overall?	Does the information have a logical flow?

## Smell the roses

Don't just browse quickly by and only check out the home page. Take time to go through several pages of information. Remember, this is your competition. You may learn a thing or two while you are playing spy. A good indication of the amount of content is to look through the menus. While not always an indicator of quality content, it can help you understand what your competition thinks is quality content. You will judge the quality as you look through the pages.

## Find other sites you like

You can also get ideas for your site by just looking around. Make notes of the ones you like and what you like about them. The most obvious thing you will notice is the design style. Is it contemporary, rustic, very structured etc.

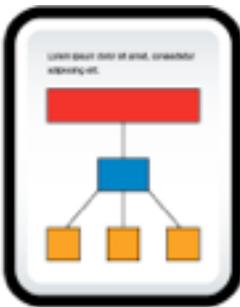
## Assess your browsing habits



Your browsing habits are generally a good indicator as to how others surf the web. So, don't have expectations that don't support your approach to browsing. In other words, first time visitors to your site are probably going to surf the web the way you do. Think about what draws you into spending more time on a site. Chances are what draws you in will draw them in. Your site isn't going to be great because it's yours. It's going to be great based on how you compare.

# Organize your content

## Simple ways to get organized



After your virtual self assessment and spy mission, you will want to sit down with your notes and begin to organize your content. This may seem simple, or even unnecessary, but you will be amazed at how your ideas will change once you commit them to paper.

If you are a visual person you could use something like Powerpoint or Keynote (Mac) to create a web site diagram/map. It's really a big flow chart type diagram. When I do layouts this way I use different colors to indicate if the page is a direct link from the menu, or what I call a "context link" from the text or image on a page. You know, the old "*Click here to go someplace*" vs using a menu structure to access another page or section of a page.

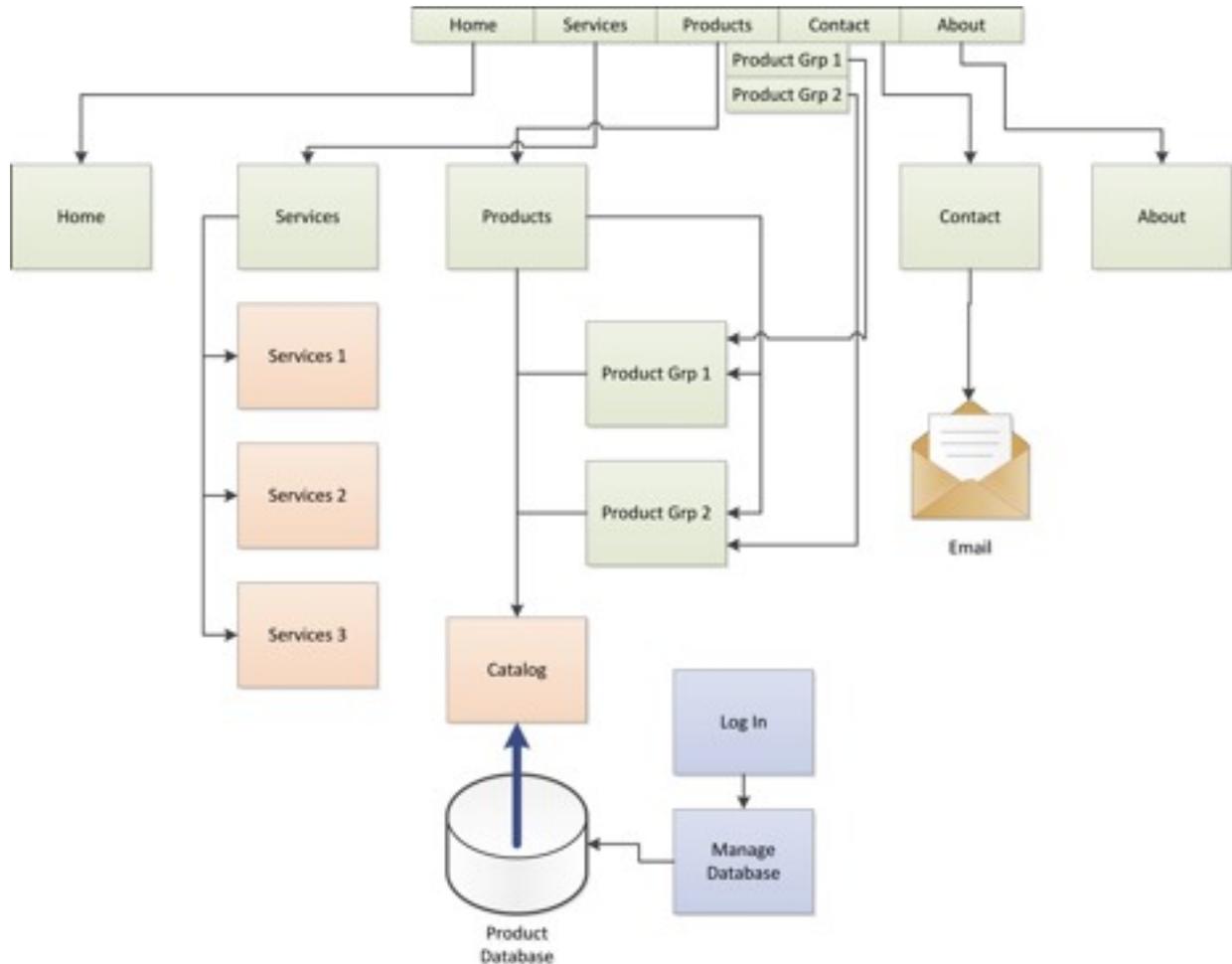
I am a big fan of context links because your reader is at that point and, like a good cross reference, they can jump to something else and come back easily. Not everything fits into a menu so make use of these when you can.

Back to the topic at hand. I like using Microsoft Visio, but if you don't have it, it's expensive to use for just doing a web site layout for one site. You would have to have a business reason to spend the money and buy it. So, use what you have at hand, including your hands. You can always do a hand-drawn layout as well. Harder to edit, but cheap and quick. Many major business ventures began on a napkin or piece of scrap paper. Why not yours?

## Here is an example layout

Notice you have three page colors, the green ones are directly associated with the menu, the tan ones are linked only to pages and the blue ones are used separate from both to manage a

database. There may be different reasons to have pages linked from other pages rather than a menu. Certainly having your secure login pages separate is a good example.



## Outlines - they really are your friend

Probably the easiest thing to do is a simple outline in a document program like Microsoft Word. If you paid attention to your high school English teacher when you were taught to organize your term papers, you will be in good shape. The main headings would be equal to a page and the sub headings underneath topic headings used to organize the content. It is understood that the main heading would be menu items. Any context links can be identified by using the [old standard blue underlined text](#) we always see on older sites and was the standard to identify links to other content. Like any outline, it's just meant as a guide. You will create the content later.

In reality you will probably use both. Use the diagramming software (or handy napkin) for the visual layout and navigation and the outline to relate the content for each page or sections within a page. When used together you will have a very detailed design that is easy to follow.

# The benefit

## **Apples to apples**

One of the main benefits to taking the time to plan your web site is that you now have the basis to solicit competitive bids for your site. No doubt each designer you contact will have additional ideas, but getting a head start puts you in control of the process. It also helps your designer understand what you have in mind when you begin a dialog.

By putting your ideas down on paper you will get a sense of the scope of the project. Depending on your budget you may have to scale it back, or discover you have room to spare. In the case of needing a larger web site, you can now visually understand the magnitude of the project and therefore be able to make budget decisions based on what you see. If the site ends up being huge, then consider breaking it down into phases that meet your budget without compromising your overall strategic goal.