How Often Should Websites Be Redesigned, Volume II

We wrote this article two years ago (http://www.greenfieldbelser.com/big-ideas/how-often-should-websites-be-redesigned) and got a lot right—but we left out an important piece of the puzzle. How often ARE websites redesigned?

Actually, we imagined the questions were one and the same; that is, we imagined research would tell us why sites were redesigned and, on average, how often, therefore, we could conclude “websites should be redesigned every X years.”

Not so simple.

We had a gut instinct as to the answer—every three years. Web technology is changing so fast you’re quite likely to have fallen seriously behind even in that short period. Think about it: social media as we know it today is only seven years old! Trends in web design are accelerating, too. A careful observer can almost pinpoint the year in which a site was designed by its style and technology.

We never want to leave you with our gut call. We’d rather provide solid research for you to share with management. So, as we see it, the questions to answer are

- What is a redesign anyway? (not as simple a question as we thought)
- How often are sites really being redesigned?
- What market or internal changes force a redesign? And finally,
- Is there any way we can extend the life of our site?

We suspect that you want to wait for the pain of the last redesign to subside before you embark on the next redesign. A web project is a lot of work! But what do the facts tell us?

Anecdotal evidence suggests sites are redesigned every two to three years.

Ask a marketing professional how often firms should redesign their website and you will probably get the response “about every two to three years.” A cursory look at numerous blogs and articles on the subject will tell you the same thing:

“There is no hard and fast answer to the question of how often you should redesign your website, though most marketers and designers suggest updating your site every two or three years.” Memphis web design firm, RocketFuel. (italics mine)
“The marketer’s conventional wisdom seems to suggest that you should redesign your site every two or three years to keep your business fresh.” Kris Kiler, http://www.netoneclick.com/redesign-website/

“If your website was built at least two years ago it would be wise to evaluate the platform and technology that was used to build it.” http://www.urbandesignfirm.com/website-design-blog/162-how-often-should-you-redesign-your-website.html

But how often are firms actually redesigning their websites?

**The numbers: Hinge Marketing and Hubspot.com surveys**

Two studies, one by Hinge Marketing and the other by Hubspot, looked at how often firms revamped their websites.

In the Hinge study, “Online Marketing for Professional Services Firms: How Professional Firms can Achieve High Growth and Profits With Online Marketing,” (Hinge Marketing, 2011, www.hingemarketing.com), 500 professional services firms were interviewed along with a panel of twenty marketing experts:

- The majority of firms *updated* their websites weekly
- Nearly half of all firms interviewed have *redesigned* their websites in the past twelve months (italics mine)
- However, they also found that “almost one in five has not done so in more than three years.”

Hubspot’s “The Science of Website Redesign” (2011, http://www.hubspot.com/view-the-science-of-website-redesign/) surveyed: 100+ consumers, 100+ marketers, 100+ agencies to reveal:

- majority of marketers redesigned their website within the last 12 months (68%)
- 16% redesigned within the last two years
- 11% between two to three years ago
- 5% over three years ago

Hubspot’s takeaway was that “most people think you should redesign your website every 1–2 years.” Really? I’d rather lead a life of crime than redesign my website every year. Trolling the Internet, we learn website designers recommend the site be designed every 13–36 months. CEOs and marketing teams recommend sites be redesigned on the same schedule. Most
interesting were the respondents on both ends of the bell curve who suggest that sites should be redesigned every three months (on the far left) and those who suggest you should never do a complete website redesign (on the far right). Although these individuals are in the minority, we also believe they got a big part of it right; i.e., a website’s content should always be noodled, massaged and changed in response to what your web traffic tells you should be done. You do read your analytics, don’t you? But we’re getting philosophical. Always work on your website, improving the design and messaging, which leads us to other half of our first question:

**What, exactly, is a ‘redesign’?**

One thing both surveys failed to address is what constitutes a redesign. In fact, that failure really means their conclusions are simply speculative. They failed to ask the right questions! Redesigns are not the same as maintenance, the routine updating all websites require. Hubspot advises: “Your website should be a living, breathing, changing being. Edit and improve constantly.” Think of a well-designed site as a newborn baby. It needs care and coddling. You certainly cannot abandon it once it’s launched, although, in truth, most sites are. “Maintenance” for most simply means updating the news or articles. But your site deserves more love and attention than that—new imagery, new pages and minisites, new messages to correspond with new initiatives, etc.

A redesign is also different from a site refresh. Typically, a site refresh means the homepage may be dramatically changed, but the balance of the site, including existing templates and navigation, remains more or less the same. A more intensive refresh might affect the existing templates but never strays far from the core structure of the site design.

A redesign is a makeover from top to bottom. A redesign creates new templates, features and functions. Usually, the navigation is reconsidered as well.

**What market changes or internal changes force a redesign?**

Changes in the organization’s mission, mergers, new offices, a radical rethinking of the brand can all force a redesign. So can technology.

1. **Your web technology was implemented when car phones were the hot new thing.**

Fortunately, standards are emerging in what still remains a new field but web technology continues to charge along without pause. Improved bandwidth and compression coding allow you to stream video, use large images and expand your canvas. Screen resolution is constantly on the move; sites designed for 640 x 480 screen resolution are years dead; larger format sites designed for 1024 x 768 screen resolution are moving up to 1280 x 1024 and expanding the 840 downward. Screen resolution is actually not an issue at all with the rise of responsive design, carried along with the tsunami of smart phones and tablets. Content management systems in the cloud add features constantly. To stay ahead in the Feature
Wars, your CMS, like our Point & Clique, needs to live in the cloud so updates can be pushed to you as they are ready. You no longer need to wait for Version X.0. Your technology should never go out of date. Change is the new normal. Who knows what’s next? Your investment in technology is a complex decision, we understand. We love your IT crew but we hope you reach outside for advice before you send out your next RFP. We get crazy lists of desired functionality most firms will never afford even if they can. Big eyes, small budget, you know the drill.

2. Yesterday’s website does not reflect your firm today

A lot can happen in a year. The Great Recession seems to have released its claws around the economy’s throat. But always firms merge, associations respond to market pressures, organizations create new services or expand into new territories. Of course, those are reasons you should update your site, refreshing imagery and messaging and adding new features. But if three years has gone by without looking in on your site, it may be time for a site visit.

3. Your competitors’ websites are beating yours up and stealing its lunch money.

Take a hard look at your design and measure it against competitors. That’s usually motivation enough for change. We’ve judged the Webby awards for several years. As judges get together in advance of the competition to share thoughts, we all agree that sites are not judged within their vertical but against all websites. Yes, we understand the tonal differences between industries, but we cut technology and design no breaks in any industry.

4. Your navigation would have led Sacagawea to Mexico.

Navigation is the key to site design and user experience. We know where visitors want to go, but can they get there? With a contemporary CMS, you can change your navigation and improve your site yourself in response to metrics on your users, but you cannot change the navigation experience. That requires a complete site redesign. What do we mean? Navigation across the top is a de facto standard and standards, we agree, have real value. But, if you want to stand apart from your neighbors, then perhaps you want your navigation on the left and more or less hidden. Absolument pas! Well… keep an open mind. (And remember when you read this three years from now.)

5. Your content reads and looks like a high school yearbook.

Do your bio photos resemble high school yearbook headshots? Would you read your own bio? Are service or programs descriptions scannable? Tomorrow looks like yesterday sooner than you think. Sometimes rewriting is not enough. Content on most professional services websites is simply terrible. We believe the entire presentation needs to be rethought, refreshed and redesigned. Why pour old wine into new bottles? It’s vinegar and has those annoying little pieces of cork in the glass but frankly, that’s how your service descriptions are experienced.
6. Design trends have changed significantly.

Back in the 1980s, my wife had Norma Kamali’s shoulder pads in just about every jacket. Not so much now. What goes for fashion is also true to an extent about design trends. In the case of websites, design is intimately connected to technology. In 1995, websites reflected the poor bandwidth and early coding strategies of the era. We’ve come light years since then. Remember, your website is generally the first tangible impression a buyer has of your business. Make a good one. Design trends in websites are different from all other design. Why? Because designing and building a website isn’t speedy. In fact, it’s SO-O-O SLO-O-W. By the time your site is launched, we’ve moved on to something new, so demand cutting edge from us and others. You won’t regret it.

Cut to the chase, please

We did our own survey. We asked three questions. The first, “Why did you redesign your website?” You said…

- old and tired 61%
- competitive landscaped changed 36%
- strategy changed 32%
- expanded geographical footprint 26%
- leadership change 23%
- too limited (technology) 19%
- misperceived (repositioning) 16%

These numbers do not add up to 100% because we let folks check as many boxes as they wished. While one-third of respondents redesigned their site because of strategic reasons, three-fifths admitted they changed the site simply because they were sick of it. You might want to ask yourself why you buy a new car. Keep reading…

We also asked “When did you last redesign your website?”
Isn’t that amazing? For those of you who are Mac users, this looks like nothing less than the Spinning Wheel of Death. Sites are constantly being redesigned.

But when we asked the second question, “When did you redesign your site before that?” we got an astonishing answer:
So the truth finally comes out. Your site is not redesigned every two or three years. It’s five or more years! This reminds me of the old law firm brochure (accountants and consultants may have had the same experience). Year one, we design and print the brochure. It lives in boxes in a closet for two years, is unenthusiastically distributed for another year before it seems “old and tired” in light of a changing firm and changing market. We take a year to get the new brochure in the budget and get started in year five. At the end of year five, the new brochure rolls off the presses. My, how times don’t change! Every human behavioral pattern repeats itself. What’s new is old again.

**We finally conclude…**

The numbers show websites seem to get old and tired before corporate strategy changes. For too many firms, sites were old and tired when they were launched. It won’t surprise you to hear us say that your best investment is in cutting-edge design and technology. Consider the messenger, discount for hyperbole and we believe you will still conclude that your best investment is in cutting-edge design and technology. Do you imagine anyone is giving you points anymore for looking, sounding and behaving out-of-date? Consulting firms? Not hardly. Associations? Nope. Accounting firms? Not even. Law firms? Please, that ship sailed.