

DearbornTM

Real Estate Education

Website and Marketing
Best Practices Guide*

* Please note: The Best Practices outlined in this guide are subject to change. Please refer to the links provided throughout this guide for the latest information in regards to the promotion of your school.



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As you plan your site, consider a wish list of function or content areas that you might want to include in the future.

Website Strategy: before you begin

Before you begin designing your site, take time to develop a basic marketing plan to ensure your design allows for your short- and long-term needs. That plan should include the following:

- **Define your audience.** Who are they? What types of sites do they visit? How tech-savvy are they? This will help you organize your site content to make the most sense to your users.
- **Plan your promotion.** How will you market your site? Examine how you currently promote your business and have plans in place prior to site launch on how you can incorporate messaging about the site.
- **What future functions would you like to incorporate into your site?** Consider a wish list of function or content areas that you might want to include in the future. Planning for these early can save you time and money later if you build with future growth and functionality updates in mind.
- **How will you maintain your site?** The best part of the web is its dynamic nature. You can change things quickly to fit content or market needs. Be sure to have a plan in place for updates—who will make them, how they will be made, what your proofing process will be, who will monitor the site regularly to ensure content is current, and who will address incoming questions from visitors.
- **Website design resources.** If you don't have access to a web designer, you may be able to find a resource in an intern from your local college or university. If you want to design the site yourself, there are great resources available online, including templates and website builders.

Resources to help you develop your website strategy:

www.thesitewizard.com

webdesign.about.com

www.netidnow.com

www.moonfruit.com

Some examples of templates and web builders:

www.wix.com

www.gybo.com

www.godaddy.com

www.weebly.com

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If you have a tech-savvy audience that will access content from tablets and phones, make sure the site design supports easy viewing from these devices.



Website Design: creating a visitor-friendly site

Before creating site designs, it's helpful to define which elements your pages will contain, including:

- **Navigation links.** Which links will remain on pages throughout the site?
- **Site functions.** Functions include site search, RSS feeds, newsletter sign-ups, registration or sign-ins, contact links, and so forth. What are your needs today? How do you see them changing? Develop a wish list of capabilities that you might like to phase into future design updates.
- **Design.** What brand elements should the site connect with? Graphic treatments, logos, imagery, color palette, and so on.
- **Copy.** What is the brand voice? How does that voice speak to the different audiences it encounters online?

Initial Site Design

Good design uses simple navigation to quickly walk users through their chosen content path. A few key considerations:

- **Minimize the number of clicks.** Use links and other navigation tools to direct users to information as quickly as possible.
- **Choose clean and simple fonts and colors.** Some print fonts don't translate well to the web. Choose web-safe fonts to ensure that visitors see what you've intended with even the most basic systems.
- **Use images and graphics that support the content.** Unnecessary icons and graphics create visual clutter. Always be sure to assign alt tags to images in case visitors view the site with images turned off.
- **Keep your audience in mind.** If you have a tech-savvy audience that will access content from tablets and phones, make sure the site design supports easy viewing from these devices by keeping key links easy-to-find and near the top of the page.
- **Keep copy concise.** Enable visitors to click links if they are interested in more or related information.
- **Design with content hierarchy in mind.** Important items that are viewed often or that are key revenue generators need to be prominent. Using web analytics tools that allow you to analyze visitor paths can help you prioritize where items should appear on a page.

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An important step in your website launch is to create and maintain an XML sitemap for your site and point the search engines to it.

SEO guideline resources:

www.seomoz.org/

[beginners-guide-to-seo](#)

<http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.com/2010/01/google-seo-resources-for-beginners.html>

Keyword research tool:

adwords.google.com

XML Sitemap Submission:

Support.google.com/webmasters

Web analytics tools:

www.google.com/analytics

www.adobe.com/solutions/digital-analytics.html

www.webtrends.com

Search Engine Optimization: organic search

Website content plays an important part in getting your site found by search engines. You can improve your site's search engine ranking simply by having site content that is relevant to search terms used through search engines.

Page Content: Your page text should include instances of keywords that your audience will use to find services like yours (e.g., real estate education, realtor licensing, or home appraisal training).

Meta Tags: Meta elements provide information about a given webpage, most often to help search engines categorize them correctly. They are inserted into the HTML document, but are often not directly visible to a user visiting the site. Search engines index your webpage based upon these keywords and phrases, and then display the results to users. The closer your tags match the words that are entered in the search field, the higher you place in the results page. Meta tags can be modified anytime, so you can change them periodically to test different tags for the best result. Meta tags have lost a good deal of their impact over time since many sites have unscrupulously loaded their Meta content with terms to fool search engines, but it's still a good idea to incorporate them into your site.

Title Tags: Inserted in the HTML code of a page, a title tag provides search engines with a big-picture description of a page's content. This tag is one of the most useful, and most often overlooked, content pieces that can improve your site's search engine rankings. The title tag should include your company name and a relevant keyword phrase on which the page content is based. Note: Title tags and Meta tags should include unique information that applies specifically to a given page's content.

Site Submission: Once thought to be a critical component of getting your site identified by search engines, site submission is now a basic step to getting your site found. An important step in your website build is to create and maintain an XML sitemap for your site and point the search engines to it.

If you don't submit your site to the search engines, you rely on being discovered by search engine spiders. If you have strong content, site structure and links from directories, blogs, and so forth, you will be found. But using an XML sitemap can decrease the time it takes for search engines to find you.

Ongoing Analysis: Services such as Google Analytics, Adobe, or web trends can help you track visitor traffic and identify common paths they take. You can use this data to monitor how visitors behave on your site and adjust content and links to steer them to content you want them to see.

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A key to link exchanges is careful screening to ensure the linking sites are credible and relevant.

Social media applications:

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media

Search engine advertising (PPC):

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pay_per_click

www.google.com/ads/adwords

Remarketing resources:

www.google.com/ads/innovations/remarketing.html

Online Marketing: expanding your site awareness

Banner Ads: Banner advertisements can help attract new students to your school. These clickable ads appear on third-party websites. Unlike search engine ads, banner ads primarily use graphics, versus simple text, with a strong call to action. Many associations or professional organizations accept banner ads on their sites.

Link Exchange Program: Link exchange programs offer an inexpensive option to attract new students to your site. Link exchanges are usually free programs where exchange partners, such as vendors, service providers, or professional associations in which your school does business, will put a link to your school site on their site in exchange for a return link on your site. Many sites will create “resources” pages to house or solicit link exchanges with others. A key to link exchanges is careful screening to ensure the linking sites are credible and relevant.

Social Media: In recent years, social media has become a powerful way to quickly spread information at a grassroots level. Social media relies on user-generated content, including that found in blogs, message boards, podcasts, forums, and a number of other formats. Being active in social media forums including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and numerous others can increase your exposure to targeted audiences and create a platform for linking to your site content.

Search Engine Advertising: This paid online advertising drives traffic to your site. Also known as “Pay-per-click” or “PPC” advertising, these clickable text ads appear on the right or top of the results screen during an organic search. Pay-per-click campaigns are affordable because you control how much you want to spend. You set a monthly maximum budget and limit on how much you are willing to pay for each ad click. You are charged according to how many clicks your ad generates or until you’ve reached your budget limit and your ad stops running.

Remarketing Advertising: Remarketing lets you show ads to users who have previously visited your website as they browse the web. Remarketing is a powerful way to stay engaged with your target audience. Presenting them with highly relevant ads and offers across the web, and making sure your brand is top of mind when they’re ready to buy, can radically improve ROI.

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Checklist for creating effective emails:

- Connect your email visually with your brand.
- Keep messages short and graphics simple.
- Communicate timely and relevant information recipients will find helpful.
- Use links to offer details instead of extensive text.
- Keep the most important information and links close to the top.
- Always include a direct link to a contact person for questions.
- Subject lines are important. Consider testing them to see what works best for your audience.
- Follow [CANSPAM guidelines](#) to prevent your messages from being blocked.
- Tailor your email frequency to your audience. More than weekly will likely result in increased “unsubscribe” requests.
- Use opt-in lists only. If you are using an outside list, provide recipients with a means to opt-in to future communications.
- Keep lists clean and frequently updated.

Email Marketing: growing your business through email

Email Marketing

Email can be one of the most affordable, accountable, and effective marketing tools you’ll find. It enables you to stay connected with your membership, students, and prospects with updated information on your offerings and other newsworthy items including:

- Education updates
- Approaching CE deadlines
- Professional development articles to help agents compete (is there a corresponding title in your bookstore)
- General information on prelicensing requirements, etc.
- Relevant items in the news and regulatory updates

Email List Development

If you don’t have an email list, begin by collecting email addresses and contact information from current students and prospects. To help find new recruits:

- Post a “Join Our List” button on your website.
- Purchase lists from state regulatory boards (although some may not allow emailing).
- Have a signup sheet or “Join our List” form at career fairs and trade shows you attend.
- Send a postal mailing driving students and prospects online to provide email addresses for future emailed information.
- Use a clear opt-in statement that specifically addresses how the visitor’s name will be used; provide an option for unsubscribing to the list in the future.
- Never share your list with outside parties without recipient permission.

Email marketing resources:

search.constantcontact.com/email-marketing/index.jsp

www.icontact.com/

www.silverpop.com/marketing-resources/index.html

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Checklist for creating effective print pieces:

- Text color should contrast background adequately
- Font sizes and line spacing should make reading easy
- Give your images taglines to explain them
- Place your logo where it will be seen
- Use a tagline that makes the company's purpose clear
- Layout should be easily understood
- Don't forget contact information
- Use clear headlines and subheads
- Use a contents page for longer brochures and booklets
- Keep colors and styles consistent throughout
- In your text body, be concrete and descriptive and avoid jargon

Direct Marketing: reach your students through direct mail

When it comes to direct mail, a lot depends on how you're going to distribute your marketing piece or expect it to be used. Will you mail it, hand it out, hang it up, or leave it where your customers gather? Here are some commonly used direct mailing pieces and some tips for each.

Flyers: Always keep your design brand-appropriate. Keep it simple and bold, don't overload your design with too many visuals and multiple fonts. Your message should be short and concise and ask for what you want. Make your call to action very visible to the reader.

Brochures/Booklets: When considering your brochure, it is important to carefully consider the intended function and profile of the reader. The style of your brochure is defined by your target audience. Brochure readers will often scan the text, so this must be considered when writing the copy. Ensure copywriting is accurate and effective. Balance your layout with images, color, and textual information. A user-friendly brochure is the main goal—keep it simple and friendly.

Catalogs: The first impression of your catalog and the decision to open it is driven by the cover. The cover must be aesthetically appealing, but also convey what is included in the content. Catalog copy must be clear, concise, easy to read, educational, and even entertaining. The best catalogs are highly visual, allowing the user to breeze through them with minimal effort. Be sure to make ordering easy by including a phone number, website, or mail-in form. Don't forget, your direct mail is only as successful as your mailing list. Be sure to de-dupe your list and use the [National Change of Address](#) database. It is also a good idea for print catalogs to coexist with a corresponding website or electronic catalog version.