25

Website 'Must Haves'
For Driving Traffic, Leads & Students
TO YOUR SCHOOL

Keep Your Eyes Open!

We placed bonus tips, additional information and links to resources on the side margins of many of these pages. (**Check out the second to last page**)

93%

Of Buying Starts with Online Research

links

images

tags

email

blog

forms

SEO

XML

CTA

301s

proof

INTRODUCTION

Having a website is not a strategy

Charter schools, Private Schools, Vocational schools… doesn't matter, simply having a website isn't the key to great results, it's the ability turn your website into an inbound marketing machine that moves the needle. Your website has a hefty goal and it needs to wear many hats. A website doesn't just need to exist; it needs to perform. It needs to attract visitors, educate them and convince them to pick up the phone, or fill out an enrolment form.

This book is not so much a "How To" do the technical things that need to be done, but is more of a reference guide for School Directors, Admission professionals and their marketing managers to ensure their development teams aren't just building a website and calling it a day. The intent of this book is essentially to keep your development team "honest", ensure they are using industry best practices, and to aid you in selecting a competent firm to work with.

What's The Biggest Factor Driving Website Design?

Websites go in and out of style just like clothes. Sometimes it's about design trends, and sometimes its about technology. Modern website design is now being driven by mobile behavior. We're now past the mobile Tipping Point, and Mobile users have now surpassed Desktop users worldwide. It only makes sense that web designers have shifted their attention to mobile usability with desktop design falling into place. Although this book is desktop/mobile agnostic, it may be helpful to know what's driving the current trend in design.

How to Use this book

We tried to make this book as easy to read as possible, both in the manner in which we wrote the text, and how we visually present the information. We want this to be a "comfortable" read, so we segmented into "snackable" chunks.

Part 1 –
What's in a Name?

Selecting the perfect domain name for your school is crucial to your marketing efforts because the cost of changing it in the future can be severe. Not only will it be part of your school's brand, the name can actually influence parents, students and search engines. If you change it in the future you may have to go back and update all of your collateral material, and even worse, negate any search engine influence that you built up over time. That's why we are dedicating this first chapter to everything you need to consider before taking that crucial first step.

If you already have a great name, skip to **Must-Have #2:** Domain Ownership Strategy

Must-Have #1:
A Great Domain Name!

You have all the paperwork in place, now you're pulling it all together; your business plan, your schools' unique value proposition and your branding. You have the School name, but what are you going to call the website? In a perfect world, you would just stick a "www" in front of your school's name, throw a "dot-org" or "dot-edu" on the end, and you're all set.

Only one problem…. Your dream name… you know, the one that conveniently sounds like your school? It's already been taken. It's not that hard to figure out who owns YOUR domain name, and often they don't appear to be doing anything with it. If it isn't already for sale, you can approach them to see if they would like to sell…. Just don't expect any bargains.

Let's assume that your first choice is out of reach

It's time to get creative. The problem is that there is more to consider than you might think. After all, once you choose a domain name and start using it, it sets off an entire chain of commitment; collateral material, brand recognition, moving the existing website… better to invest the time and do it right the first time. Over the years I've developed some very strong opinions on domain name selection. There is a certain hierarchy of considerations and compromises:

Do you qualify for a .edu? (Possibly not)

Generally, dot-edu is better than Dot-org for a school. But not every type of school will qualify for one. Eligibility for a .edu domain name is limited to U.S. postsecondary institutions that are institutionally accredited, i.e., the entire institution and not just particular programs, by agencies on the U.S. Department of Education's list of Nationally Recognized Accrediting Agencies.   In general, a good Dot-edu or Dot-org domain is usually most desirable for a school.

Shorter is better than Longer:

Shorter is easier to type, easier to remember and fits better on collateral material. At the end of the day, a memorable domain name trumps everything else. If you can't get a good short domain, try to make it easy to remember. Stringing additional words together that form a sentence (not a paragraph) may make it easier to remember.

Easy to spell:

Face it, some words are just harder to spell than others. Unless someone is clicking on a link, they have to be able to type it in. Hard to spell domains leave a lot of room for error. Perhaps even sending parents and students to another school's website.

Avoid Abbreviations and Special Characters:

Did you know that SCVMA.org is the Southern California Veterinarian Association? Neither does anyone else. Using special characters like dashes and hyphens also make it harder to remember, and in my case it even taxes my typing skills.

Must-Have #2:
Domain Ownership Strategy

Keep track of ownership:

Often a school assigns the domain registration to a staff member who eventually leaves the school and no one has the registration information to make changes, or even to renew it. This is surprisingly common. The domain should be assigned to standard alias like (info@...) and the records should be kept along with all the other important company info. If you have an IT department, it should be their responsibility.

Buying for Defense:

There is always a lot of debate about buying all the variations and combinations of your domain name. The rule of thumb is; if you can afford it…buy it! Why? Because any school who is likely to buy a similar domain name as yours may be a competitor of sorts. If you buy it first, you just took it off the market and gained a competitive advantage.
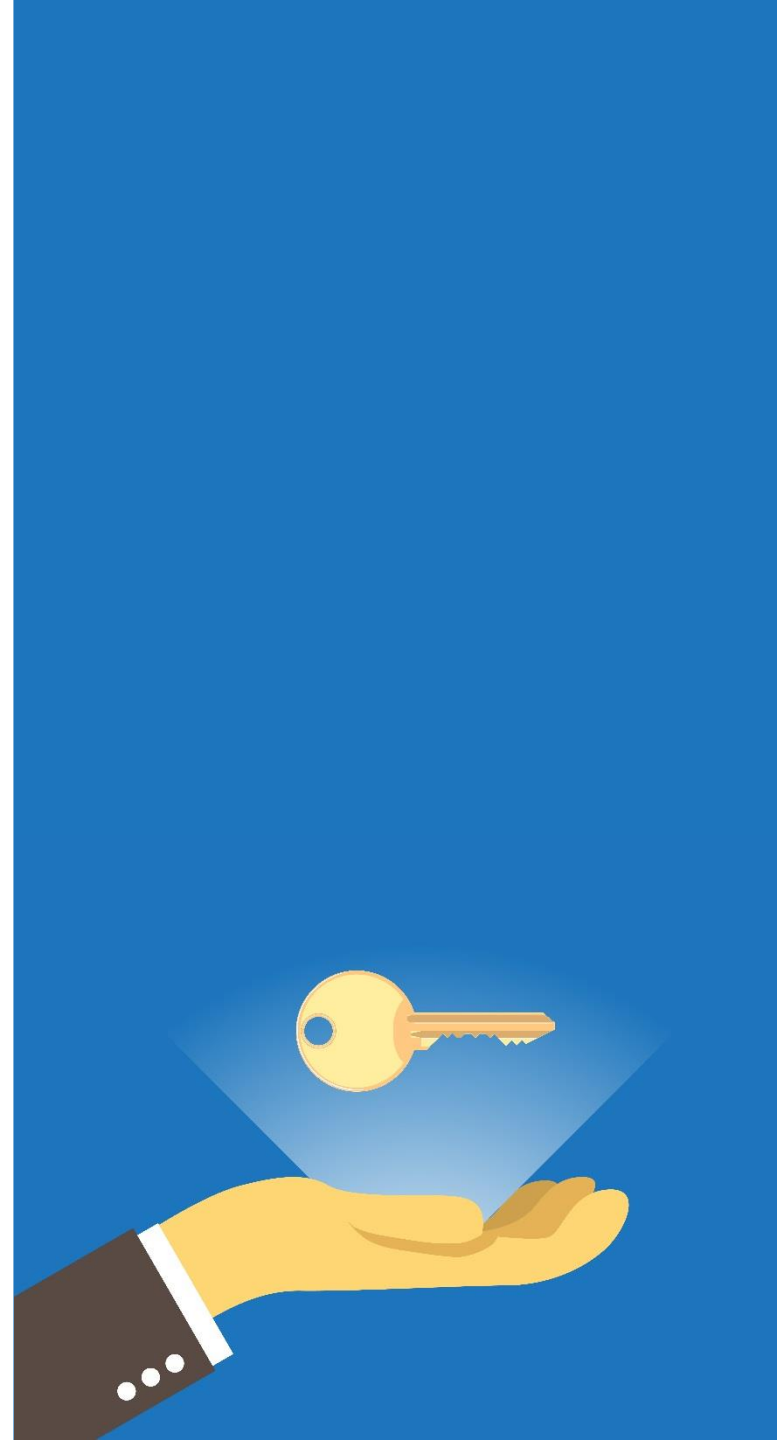
Domain Ownership Strategy

Register for multiple years:

When a domain name is purchased, it goes into a database that is easily accessible to Google and the other search engines. Buying a domain name for one-year is a signal that you only have a temporary use for the domain, or that it may be for some spam like activity. Conversely buying a domain for 5 or 10 years shows long term commitment and weighs in your favor when search engines evaluate your website for placement in the search results.

Toxic domains:

Some domain names are forever tarnished. They may have been associated with bad content (Porn or hate sites). More recently these include websites that have a history of "Black Hat" SEO practices that are counter to Google's Webmaster Guidelines.

At the end of the day, your domain name is the center of your school's digital identity. Your Social presence, your branding, and your school email all come back to your domain selection. It's worth spending some time on because it can be expensive to undo later.

Did You Know...

Domain names that have been around a while age like wine?

"Aged Domains" with an untarnished history, or with a track record of good search results have an advantage. These would be the type of "used" domains that you would want to purchase if you didn't start from scratch.

Part 2 –
Modern Layout Trends

Website layout has evolved from bells and whistles and drop shadows and flash to more of a "flat design" look. The watchword is usability. Users aren't impressed with fancy graphics as mush as they are with clean design and easy navigation.

With so many websites being viewed on the small screen of a smartphone or tablet, there just isn't any tolerance for inefficiencies.

Must-Have #3:
Responsive Design for Mobile

Entire websites are now being designed for mobile devices first, and desktops as a secondary consideration. The odds are very high that your website or landing page will be viewed on an array of different sized mobile devices as much, or more than their desktop counterparts. Did you ever try filling out a tiny form with little buttons on a smart phone? Enough said.

Responsive Design is where the website automatically resizes itself to the size of the device it is being viewed on. Since there are now more searches being conducted on mobile devices than desktop devices, it only makes sense that you cater to that audience. Students, and parents of school aged children are on mobile devices more than they are desktop devices.

The reason Responsive Design is near the top of this list is that it can take a lot of upfront planning, so make sure your designer knows this is a "must have".

Must-Have #4:
Design Consistency

Your website should not be a hodgepodge of different styles, fonts, colors and layouts. Users adapt to what they see pretty quickly, but if you keep changing the various elements that make up your website, it not only looks unprofessional and disorganized, it makes it more difficult for them to navigate and develop a sense of confidence in your site and your service.

Layouts: Typically there is one layout for the Home page, which can be more graphically intensive and less "wordy" and a separate, but related layout for the internal pages. There might on occasion be a viable reason for a third layout for sub-pages, and certainly a separate layout for Landing Pages for specific marketing campaigns. Never play hide and seek with the navigation by moving it to different locations every time a visitor moves from page to page. Just don't make them work that hard.

Pro Tip...

Don't get fancy with body copy. That's for delivering a message not showing off
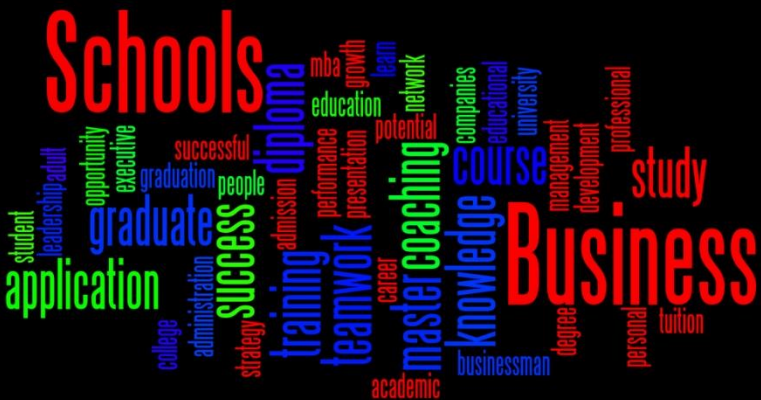
Fonts: Font selection makes a statement about your site and your business. Fonts can be boring, exciting, creative, traditional, or modern. One thing they shouldn't be is hard to read. Limit the amount of fonts to 2 or 3 max. It OK to use specialty fonts for your headlines, but don't stray too far from traditional fonts like Calibri, Arial, Helvetica, Verdana, Times New Roman, etc. for body copy. When pairing fonts it's about Contrast, not conflict. Pairing certain combinations of serif and sanserif fonts can have a very pleasing effect.

Colors: How many colors should you use? Well, there is no exact answer. Too few colors and you site might look boring, too many and it might look busy. In the hands of a good designer there are no rules. However most designers agree that 3 well-paired colors is a good start. As a rule of thumb, the primary color should cover about 60% of the space, the secondary color about 30% and the accent color should clock in at about 10%.

You might start with the school colors you are already vested in (your logo or existing collateral material). A great resource for choosing color combinations that go together can be found at www.colorcombos.com.

Social Icons: No discussion on website design would be complete without mentioning the need to build social proof by including links through recognizable social icons to your social properties like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest, Google Plus, etc. Resist the temptation to put an icon for every social platform in existence. How disappointing for someone to click through to a social property with no activity on it. Reserve your links to only the platforms that you are going to be active on.

From a layout perspective there are tons of free social icon graphics out there. Find ones that work in both shape and color and place them on the same spot on every page (typically on the header or footer).

Share this eBook ....

Must-Have #5:
Great Imagery!

People see images long before they see anything else, so your image selection is critical. Images can tell a story in a fraction of a second…so they better be telling the story you want to tell. Images should not be used just to fill up white space and should be carefully selected.

Don't Be Lame: The tendency is for an inexperienced (or poor) designer to download a stock photo that is ultra-symbolic and mechanically paste the meaningless rectangle onto the page somewhere without giving it the attention it deserves. People like clever. Instead of searching for images based on a literal cue, consider the spirit of what is being discussed.

Be Relevant, but not Obvious: It takes a surprising amount of time to search for, and modify just the right image, so don't chastise your design team for taking the extra time to do it right. The imagery on your site can make it or break it.

Great Imagery!

Be Consistent: Either go with actual photos of real students and instructors and objects, or go with illustrations. Be careful if you use both or the final product may look disjointed and patched together.

With photos you can often find multiple images of the same model, or different images from the same photographer. Although it's not necessary, this may contribute to a seamless professional feel. Same is true for illustrations by the same artist. It's not necessary to make sure all the colors are the same, in fact using different colors in different sections of the book can help mentally segment the sections of the book.

Be Careful: If you use many of the free images sites out there, be aware that you are still responsible for the image licenses, even if you think they are offering a free-for-all. Contrary to popular belief, you can NOT just search Google images and use whatever you find.

Must-Have #6:
Intuitive Navigation

Do not make your visitors think. They're on a mission to find what they are looking for and you are on a mission to make sure they find it. People appreciate "clever", but not at the expense of time. Playing hide and seek with the information they are looking for and forcing them to "explore" every page on your site will not end well for you. You are only going to get so many clicks out of any visitor.

Have a Plan: Think in terms of paths or "silos" where similar information links to other related information to the exclusion of other topics. It's your job to organize your content for your visitors and send them down the right path.

Have a Map: Not an XML Site Map (to be covered later), this can be a hand drawn list of your top-level pages and subpages. We prefer to use PowerPoint where we can quickly draw boxes for each page and move them around as necessary. We've even used yellow sticky notes on a wall for extremely large websites (and then take picture of it for our designers).

Pro Tip…

Visually separate your content into sections on each page so the consumer can easily scan and identify what they are interested in. Design in "sections."

Scrolling is the New Click: You may have noticed a trend towards longer pages. This is being driven by the popularity of the mobile experience. Just a short time ago common wisdom was to put everything above the fold (no scrolling). The idea was to create short pages that looked effortless to read and then click to see more. The reality has always been that it is less effort to scroll than to click and wait for the next page to load. However it is still true to put your most important message above the fold.

Most mobile devices allow you to scroll effortlessly with your finger. The advantage is that all the information for a related topic can be quickly scanned and reviewed on a single page. This avoids clicking on to dead ends and additional load time and bandwidth usage every time a new page is downloaded.

Now Serving Hamburger: There is a bit of a debate right now about the value of the "Hamburger" button (the little three-lined button on the top of mobile devices). You may notice this creeping into desktop design as a way to unify the navigation between mobile and desktop. Some like it because it's clean and simple, others argue that it hides your primary navigation. We advocate a hybrid of both for our clients.

Part 3 –
Content is King <small>(insert cliché here)</small>

Content is the ONLY reason a consumer will visit your website. It's also the only reason they will return. Good quality "relevant" content will attract visitors and influence what they do. If it meets the needs of consumers, it probably meets the needs of search engines. Poor or "thin" content is quickly discovered and rejected. Once a consumer leaves your site, they ain't coming back. Content comes in a lot of different flavors. That's what this section is all about.

Must-Have #7:
Consistent & Proper Tone

How do you want to be perceived by your customers? Do you want to reflect a proper academic, no-nonsense school that caters to serious students who just want an education and don't require a warm and fuzzy experience? Perhaps you want to create a more personable image for the school that creates the impression of a rich social experience?

All the players need to agree on the "Buyer Persona" of the final product BEFORE selecting images and writing copy. This is usually dictated by two factors; your school culture, and your buyer persona's. You need to understand who you are, and what your "customers" expect, and are most comfortable with.

Bonus Tip–

The About Us page is typically one of the most overlooked pages on anyone's website. People tend to think that 'About Us' pages have to sound formal to gain credibility and trust. But in fact they provide an opportunity to humanize your school by telling cool stories about how and why the school was founded, showcase real human beings in your organization, and put your visitors at ease by letting them get to know your school as real people. Stay true to the persona of your website...but relax a little…

Must-Have #8:
Strategic Messaging

There are four basic questions you need to ask yourself regarding the content of your website.

- Will people know what the school is about within seconds?
- Will they understand what page they're on and what it's about?
- Will they know what to do next?
- Why should they enroll/subscribe/download from this site instead of from another school?

Keep in mind the Internet is Short Attention Span Theater. You have between 2-8 seconds for a visitor to decide what their next move is from the moment they arrive on your page. They see headlines, images and bullet points and if they like what they see, they may actually read something or start their buyer's journey and venture down your enrollment funnel.

Must-Have #9:
Great Headlines!

Since we all have a tendency to scan before we read, one of the few things that are guaranteed to be seen and actually read is the headline. A successful web page is a combination of many elements, but if your headline fails, your entire page will fail. You need to spend more time on your headline than on any other element of your copy.

"You HAVE to crap out 25 headlines for every piece of content"
-David Ogilvy

Your headline should be either clever, shocking or interesting. It should be focused, relevant and address your target audience's pain. Headlines are typically the predominant piece of text that show up on search results, emails and social media. If no one pays attention to your headline, no one will read your copy.

Headline Best Practices

Keep Your Headline to One or Two Lines: Remember, people aren't reading your headline, they're scanning it. It isn't body copy, it's an attention grabber at a glance.

Center Your Headline: This gives it the special emphasis it deserves. It stands out as important. DO NOT ever center body copy. Anything longer than two lines that is centered is harder to read.

Make Them Big: No BIGGER! Your Headline should be disproportionately larger than any other text on the page, not just the next font size up.

Make Them Bold? Maybe, maybe not. Depends on the overall size differential between the headline and the body copy and the font selection.

i am writer

More Best Practices

Use a Different Font: Reserve separate fonts for the headline and the body copy. You might try mixing serif and san serif fonts.

Use Title Case: Make the first letter of each word capitalized. You can keep spacer words like "to" and "the" lower case to put more emphasis on the important words.

Quotation Marks: In some cases you might consider putting quotation marks around your headline to further make it stand out.

Use a Sub-Headline: Make it the same size as the body copy (or smaller than the primary headline) and perhaps make it bold.

Ready to start scribbling down some headlines? Not just yet… Exactly who are you writing that headline for? Certainly not for yourself. You're writing it to appeal to your next best customer, and that customer should be a very specific person.

i a m w r i t e r

Must-Have #11:
Easy to Read Copy

Your Headlines should be "Scanable" but your body copy should be "Snackable". Unless the purpose of your website is to sell a book, don't write a book.

- Use half the copy that you would use in printed material
- Landing page headlines should match the headlines that got the visitor to click
- Don't waste valuable real estate with a welcome message
- "You" and "your" trumps "we" and "our"
- People only read the first few words of bullets points, and paragraphs
- People read the beginning and end of lists, not the middle
- Keep your first few paragraphs short and inviting
- Alternate long and short paragraphs
- Paragraphs shouldn't be longer than four or five lines
- Numerals have more impact than written numbers
- Nothing more than needed, nothing less than needed

BONUS Tip:
Don't let your pharmacist or lawyer write your copy.

Must (not) Have #12:
Gobbledygook

These are jargon terms and phrases that have been over-used and abused rendering them meaningless (you'll find them mostly in the high-tech and B2B industry). These words are meant to add more emphasis of a particular subject but instead they make your eyes roll.

Avoid these words:

- Next Generation
- Flexible
- Robust
- Scalable
- Easy to use
- Cutting edge
- Ground breaking
- Best of breed
- Mission critical

I think you get the idea. Make your site a no cliché zone.

Must-Have #13:
Blog that They Pay Attention to

Search engines and consumers are all about content. A blog is an easy way for almost anyone to add content to a website. Most blog software is easy to use and anyone with basic formatting skills should be able to post articles easily. Writing blogs that attract visitors and rank on search engines is all about the quality of your content and best SEO practices.

A 2013 report from Hubspot found that businesses that blog have 97% more inbound links from third party websites and users. They also report that, on average, websites that blog receive 400% more indexed Google pages that those that don't.

If done right, blogs are interactive and sharable on social media. The very nature of a blog is that it is always being updated and thus current. People read and share "current".

Pro Tip...

Consider "User Generated" content featuring your staff, instructors, or even students!

Blogging

Why You Need a Blog

Blogs are also a good way for you to build your online brand because it provides your school a voice and allows you to keep your visitors informed, and establish your company culture.

Given that marketers who blog are 13x more likely to drive positive ROI, it shouldn't be a surprise that the tactic tops high performers' list of most important inbound projects.

13x

THE IMPACT OF BLOGGING ON INBOUND ROI

Marketers who have prioritized blogging are 13x more likely to enjoy positive ROI

Source: HubSpot Sate of Inbound 2014

Blogs create more pages of fresh content, which is great for SEO, they help establish you as an education expert and thought leader. They can help drive more traffic, leads and backlinks to your website.

WARNING:

If you can't maintain a blog, don't start. Nothing cry's out "we don't care" like an article with last year's date on it.

Must-Have #14:
Make Content Shareable & Social

Social media websites have seen an exponential growth in the past decade and continue to grow larger every day. People will "Like" a post, product, or blog, causing all of their friends to see what they like and even provide them with a link to find it themselves.

Consider this type of network effect for your website. Make it just as easy for people to share and socialize about your content and resources. Providing people with excellent content that can be shared with their peers will surely increase your flow of traffic.

Add a sharing widget or plugin to every page on your site. This will enable visitors to share your pages via all the major social networks. Tools like AddThis or ShareThis are easy to install and provide analytic tracking too.

If you're on a blogging platform like HubSpot, Business Catalyst or WordPress, there are plug-ins available that enable people to share your articles and auto-publish content to the major social networks.
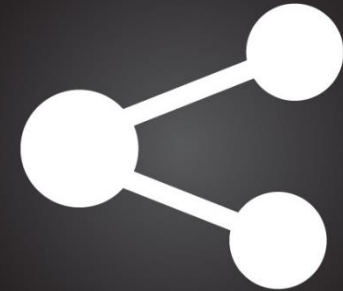
Share this eBook ....

Must-Have #15:
Customer Proof

No matter what you're selling, parents and students like to see confirmation that you've made other parents and students happy. Testimonials, parent reviews and case studies are powerful sources of content for moving prospects even closer to the final enrollment stages.

Testimonials carry quite a bit of weight in the customer buying process, but everyone knows that you can hand-pick which testimonials you want to showcase, hide negative comments and even write the testimonials yourself.

Video testimonials are pretty powerful, and they don't necessarily require high production costs. Even an amateur video testimonial shot from an iPhone has a certain degree of credibility because it obviously features real people.

Customer Proof

Testimonials are great, but Reviews are Better!

To leave a review on any credible platform, like Yelp or GooglePlus, or GreatSchools, you need to have a unique login profile, so reviews are harder (but not impossible) to fake. Therefore consumers trust them more than testimonials.

Research varies between 2013 and 2015, but the consensus is that between 79% - 90% of consumers say that online reviews impact their buying decisions.

Keep in mind that reviews are naturally skewed negative because most people don't think to leave a review when they are satisfied. Consumers who are dissatisfied however have a tendency to vent…and vent in public.

Power Tip…

Be proactive and ask known satisfied parents or students to leave you a review. Make it easy on them by sending them a direct link to where you would like them to post it.

Part 4 –
Getting Found Online

A great website isn't so great if no one visits it. Go ahead and search for a phrase that parents or students might be searching for. If you see hundreds of thousands of search results…that's your competition.

One-time Search Engine Optimization rarely works in all but the least competitive markets. It takes hard work and consistency to secure one of the coveted top spots on the search engine results. There are only 10 available spots on the first page of Google. All you have to do is be better than everyone else. These tips will help get you be better than most of them.

Page
Speed

Must-Have #16:
The Need for Speed

Believe it or not, the speed in which your website downloads to a visitor is now a major search engine ranking factor. We've already established that search engines try to emulate human behavior. And humans are spoiled. No one is going to wait 5 seconds or more every time they move to a new page on your site.

Also consider that search engines use up valuable resources whenever they come by to index your web pages. It isn't much in human terms, but multiply that across billions of pages each day, and it really adds up. They don't have any more patience than human beings for waiting around.

In any event, slow loading pages is a top "dissatisfier" in the internet world, and you will be penalized by both search engines and consumers. Avoid images with unnecessarily large file size and bloated code.

Must-Have #17:
Title Tags, & Description Tags

While this may not be the sexiest component of SEO, it is a definite must-have. A Meta Tag is a line of code that is contained in the background of a web page. Search engines look at meta tags to learn more about what the page is about.

Meta tags don't quite have the level of SEO importance as they used to, but are still very important. Search engines are smart and give more weight to quality content and good solid website architecture, but meta tags are low hanging fruit that actually have an influence in search engine placement.

If you're not a web guru, most website editors and content management systems enable you to easily edit meta tags without coding knowledge. If you don't have an editor, you can simply open a web page file (ending in .htm, .html, .asp or .php) in Notepad or a plain text editor and the meta tags will be found near the top of the document.

Example of what a "Title Tag" looks like in an HTML document:

Title Tag: The title of the page seen at the top of a web browser, also the main headline displayed in search engine results. The title should not exceed 60 characters (including spaces) and it is recommended that you limit yourself to 55 just to make sure the page title you want displayed to attract users does in fact show in full.

Search engines still use this as a valuable point of reference as long as it is relevant to page content and does not appear spammy. Try to focus on a strong keyword phrase that is relevant to the page, incorporate the primary keyword near the beginning and make it appealing to the user scanning the search results.

TITLE EXAMPLE:

<title>Digital Marketing Orange County - Kreative WebWorks</title>

Keyword Tag:

Ignore this. Search engines do…and it will cause you more issues than it will help.

Example of what a "Description Tag" looks like in an HTML document:

Description Tag: They don't influence SEO, but they do influence what consumers click on. Think about your own searching habits; before clicking on anything after searching on Google don't you first scan the results and click on the description that best describes what you are searching for?

You have 160 characters (including spaces) to write your meta description. Use keywords because search engines highlight those if that was what was searched on. Above all, write it to get the searcher to click on you instead of your competition.

DESCRIPTION EXAMPLE:

<meta name="description" content="Full-Service Digital Marketing; Websites, Search Engines & Social Media Mgt. We manage it all for a fraction of in-house costs: 949-276-6062" />

How the Title and Description tags are displayed in search engine results

Kreative WebWorks: Digital Marketing Orange County
www.kreativewebworks.com/ ▾
Full-Service **Digital Marketing**; Websites, Search Engines & Social Media Mgt. We manage it all for a fraction of in-house costs: 949-276-6062.

Must-Have #18:
Alt Tags

ALT tags provide a text alternative to an image. Back in the days of Dial-up, images took forever to download and serious surfers would turn off their graphics to speed up their browsing. Since then, alt tags are used by browsers to describe the image to the visually impaired by audibly reading it when their mouse hovers over the image.

What does this mean to you? Well, for starters, it will help you cater to the visually impaired, whose numbers are much larger than you think. More to the point, Alt tags are part of Googles Webmaster Guidelines and is also a great way to drop "hints" to the search engines about a variety of things you want them to know about you.

Remember, search engines use hundreds of different criterion to decide who ranks where for what. Although this is a minor ranking signal to the search engines, it is something under your control and is essentially low hanging fruit.

Must-Have #19:
XML Site Map

The general incentive behind an XML sitemap is to help search engine crawlers (or "spiders") sift through your pages more efficiently. An XML sitemap is simply an .xml file containing a listing of all your pages and when they were updated as well as their hierarchy and authority. It's a lot like a subway map. It shows the structure of your website and where your pages reside.

Creating a sitemap is easy. You can find sitemap generators online that will create the .xml file for you. Once you get the .xml file, simply upload it to the root directory of your website (e.g. www. website.com/sitemap.xml).

If your website is updated regularly, make it a good practice to update your xml file at least once a month so search engines have the freshest data.

Adding an XML sitemap is a component that is commonly overlooked, while it may not be the deciding factor in improving your Search Engine Optimization, it will certainly help.

*.xml

Must-Have #20:
301 Redirects

We've all experienced a time when we clicked on a broken website link that ended up with a "404 message" or "Page Not Found." A lot of times this is caused when a page is moved to a new URL and the old link hasn't been directed to the new page. Think about the lost opportunity when your customers or potential buyers want information that they can't locate.

If you choose to move a page on your website, make certain that you copy the page, move it to the specified file or folder you want, and create a 301 redirect on the original file redirecting users to the page's new location. Never flat out delete a webpage unless you can discern from Google Analytics and Google Webmaster Tools that the page does in fact serve no purpose and holds no authority.
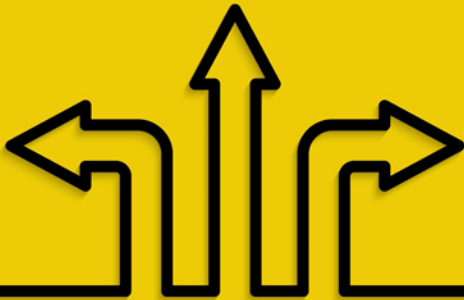
301 Redirects

If you do remove certain pages that hold authority, you will lose ranking for whatever keywords the search engines have associated with that page. When a user can't find a new page, neither can a search engine, and you'll lose any SEO status the old page once had.

Once 301s have been put in place, generate a new .xml sitemap, and manually submit that to Google through Webmaster Tools. This forces Google to understand, rather than trying to figure it out, that you have a new hierarchy in place for your site's content and that you want to create a better experience for the user performing the search.

After about 90 days you will notice Google and other search engines begin to rank the new page as opposed to the old one. Once each new page has been ranked, you can start the process of cleaning up old content on the server.

This is something best left to professionals or you might inadvertently instruct the search engines not to index your entire site. Then there is no way you will show up in the search results.
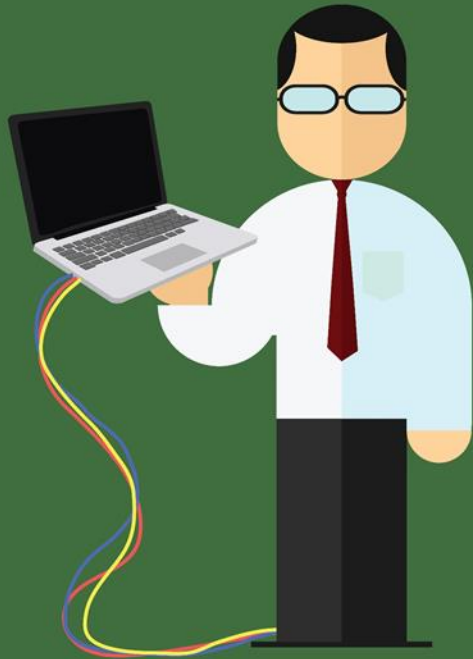
Must-Have #21:
Robots TXT File

This little file is way more important than you might think. It essentially gives the search engines instructions on what **NOT** to crawl and index on your site.

It's useful if you don't want search engines to index certain proprietary information on your site like specific images or PDFs or even internal search results. It's extremely important to keep search engines from indexing duplicate copy on your site (that could be a penalty).

Every site should have a .txt file associated with the root directory. i.e. http://www.YourSchool.org/robots.txt. Google crawls this file the moment your website is submitted for index. If this file does not exist, sometimes Google does a temporary hold on crawling your site to give you enough time to add a robots.txt file.

Why is that important? If Google is not crawling your site, your site loses authority and potential enrolments.

Must-Have #22:
Analytics

Analytics provide insight as to how your website is performing and gives you the data you need to make actual business decisions. Analytics come in lots of flavors, but the industry standard is Google Analytics. It's free and it's typically the choice of most SEO professionals.

Many web builder platforms come with their own built in analytics, but don't be alarmed if the data doesn't exactly match up from platform to platform. Each of these analytics systems retrieves its data a different way, so naturally there may be variables. The important thing is to look for trends and consistencies.

Interpreting some of the high-level data like visits and average time on site is pretty straight-forward. The most powerful combination is analytics in conjunction with Google Webmaster Tools in the hands of a professional. A good SEO firm should not only be able to do the work, but interpret the results and make incremental decisions based on the analytics data.

ANALYTICS

Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is, I don't know which half.
- John Wanamaker

Part 5 –
Conversion Optimization

You're almost there! Getting consumers to your website and intriguing them with your content is no small task. Now let's finish the job by converting them into phone calls, or submitted application forms. What's the point of bringing them to your site if you don't convert them into enrolments? This section is all about the things you "Must Have" to convert visitors into customers.

Must-Have #23:
Strategic Call-To-Action (CTA)

The effect of a successful Call to Action (CTA) is to drive a visitor to take a desired action. CTAs are typically kept above the fold or in clear sight on a page so visitors know where to take the next step. CTAs are the key to lead generation but they need to be done right to convert traffic into leads.

Make them bigger and bolder than most other elements on the page, but don't overdo it.

Consider colors of the CTA, whether it is a link, button or image. Make them look so good people will want to click on them.

Offer CTAs that provide value, like guides, whitepapers, estimates, etc. "Contact Us" is the worst form of a CTA. Don't rely on that as your only option for conversion.

Make the CTA look clickable. You can do this by making a button or adding a hover effect to an element.

1 Bigger
2 Bolder
3 Value

Strategic Call-To-Action (CTA)

Less is more. Keep it simple and clear what is being offered.

Test when possible. Try testing different colors (e.g. red verses green buttons), language, and placement to see which CTAs get more clicks and drive more leads (refer to the "Messaging" section above for A/B testing tools).

Here are some good examples of Calls-To-Action: Notice the double positioning on the top and bottom of the visible page. Also notice the use of color on the buttons to make them stand out against the background to draw attention. Also notice they don't just say "Submit", they are more of an instruction.

Pro Tips-
Call-To-Action Positioning on Page

You want to strategically place your CTA's on your site… don't just dump them arbitrarily thinking you will get greater coverage.

Segment your top-of-the-funnel and middle-of-the-funnel offers.
Place top-of-funnel type offers (whitepapers, downloads) on top-level pages. Add middle-of-funnel offers (request a quote, trial, pricing) as the prospect is digging deeper and learning more about your offering.

Place CTAs both above and below the fold.
Placing CTAs above the fold is important because that area of a page gets the most views. However, there are still other areas of a page to promote your CTAs. Add some at the bottom of pages and within body content as well.

Some studies suggest placing CTAs to the right of the page work better but testing this will ultimately determine what's best for your website.

Don't forget
Thank You Pages:

Once a prospect completes a form, don't stop there. Offer them additional downloads or resources, but don't ask them to fill out another form.

Must-Have #24:
Landing Pages that Convert!

A landing page is where visitors arrive after clicking on an email link, a search engine result, a banner ad, a PPC ad, or from an offline advertisement like a newspaper, billboard or TV/radio broadcast. Landing pages, sometimes called a "Lead Capture Page," are used to convert visitors into leads by completing a transaction or by collecting contact information from them.

Landing pages consist of:

- A headline and (optional) sub-headline
- A brief description of the offer/CTA
- At least one supporting image
- (Optional) supporting elements like testimonials or trust icons
- And most importantly, a form to capture information

Typically a good Landing page has minimal text and distractions (like navigation to other pages). What sets it apart from an informational or product page is a single specific Call-To-Action. Landing pages have one purpose: to complete a lead capture form!
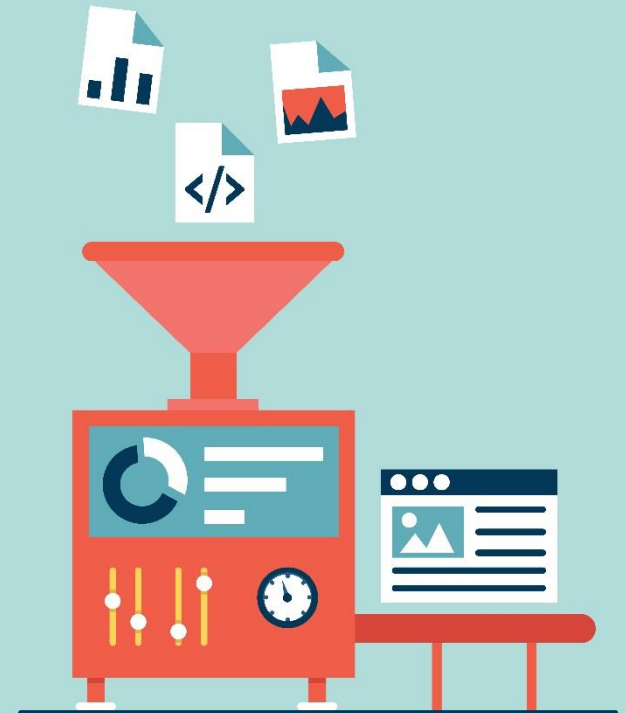
Example of a **Bad** Landing Page

Not sure what this page is offering.

Not clear what I'd be signing up for? "2 Week Trial" is hidden.

Way too much text. No one will ever read all that!

The screen shots of the product are very confusing.

No forms directly on this page to capture information.

Length of the page might be too long.

Selling too much on features and not **value**.

No customer proof: testimonials or case studies.

Example of a **Good** Landing Page

1. Main navigation has been removed
2. Logo remains in the top left corner.
3. Clear headline describing the offer.
4. Clear image of the offer.
5. Brief description of the offer including bullet points for scanning.
6. Lead form NOT on this initial page
7. Content focuses on value.
8. Not too long.

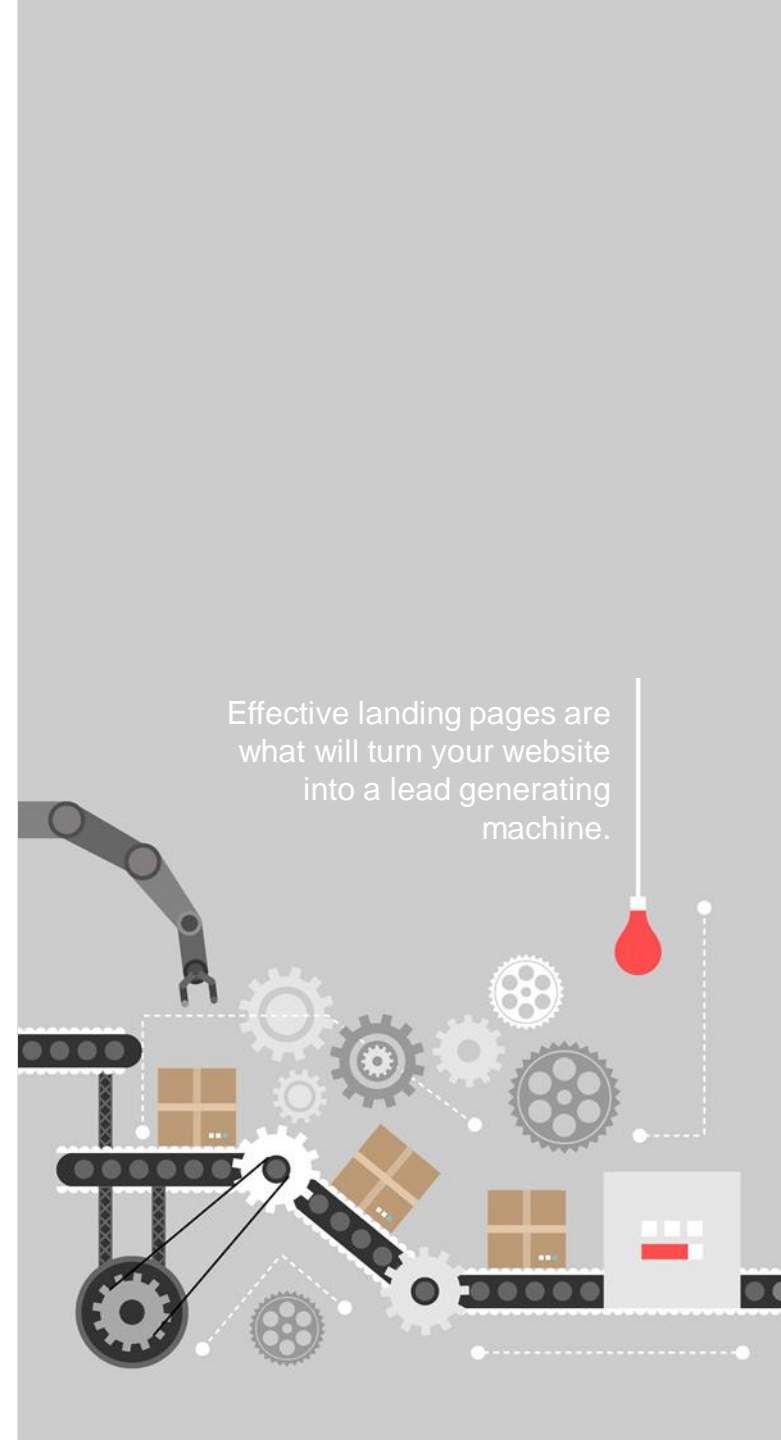# What makes an effective landing page?

Include the elements from the previous page and only what is needed. Keep your pages simple and minimize distractions.

Remove main site navigation from the landing page so visitors can focus on completing the form and not continuing to search your site. Dedicated landing pages typically perform better than using your home page.

Make it very clear what your school is offering, and why you are their best choice. Absolutely make sure that the content on your landing page matches your call-to-action. If there is a disconnect in your messaging visitors will hit the Back button.

Reduce friction – don't make visitors think too much or do too much work (i.e. reading).

Use the correct form and only collect the information you absolutely need.

Effective landing pages are what will turn your website into a lead generating machine.
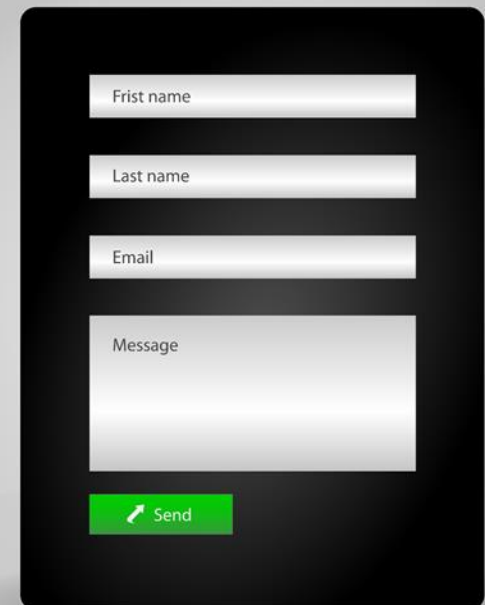
Must-Have #25:
Lead Capture Forms

Forms are the key to a landing page. Without them, there is nothing for the visitor to do on that page. Forms come in handy when it's time for people to sign-up, subscribe to your site or download an offer.

You might be wondering how much or how little information you should require with a form. There is no magic answer when it comes to how many fields your form should contain, but the best balance would be to collect only the information you really need.

The fewer fields you have in a form, the more likely that people will fill them out. This is because with each new field you add to a form, it creates friction (more work for the visitor) and fewer conversions. A longer form looks like more work and sometimes it will be avoided all together. But on the other hand, the more fields you require, the better quality those leads might be.

Recommendations for Landing Page Forms

Only ask for the information you need

Avoid asking for sensitive information that parents or students may not want to disclose...yet.

Consider the value of the offer.

The more valuable an offer may be perceived, the more information you may be able to ask for in return. If it's a newsletter subscription, only ask for email address (and maybe first name, at most).

Reduce anxiety

People are more resistant to give up their information these days, especially because of the increase in spam. Add a privacy message (or link to your privacy policy) that indicates their email will not be shared or sold.

Don't use the word "SUBMIT" on your form buttons!

No one wants to submit anything. Instead, try "download whitepaper," "Get your free eBook," or "Join our newsletter."

Fulfill the Request Instantly

Make your offer available on the very next page, or send to their inbox. Don't make them wait!

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Does Your Website Make the Grade?

Are the other schools on the playground eating your lunch? We can tell you why, and what you can do about it with our _FREE_ **WebScan**™ Website analysis.

WebScan™ for Schools

Yes, It's free for schools