

# website owners manual

the secret to a successful website

MEAP

Unedited Draft

paul boag



MANNING

Please post comments or corrections to the Author Online forum:  
<http://www.manning-sandbox.com/forum.jspa?forumID=456>



**MEAP Edition  
Manning Early Access Program**

Copyright 2008 Manning Publications

For more information on this and other Manning titles go to  
[www.manning.com](http://www.manning.com)

Please post comments or corrections to the Author Online forum:  
<http://www.manning-sandbox.com/forum.jspa?forumID=456>

## Website Owner's Manual ToC

1. **The secret to a successful website**
2. **Stress free planning**
3. **Don't forget the explosives expert**
4. **Differences over design**
5. **Fundamental advice on creating killer content**
6. **An introduction to user centric web design**
7. **A roadmap for choosing a content management system**
8. **Outlining web design best practice**
9. **Explaining web design "techno babble"**
10. **Where to begin in website promotion**
11. **Basic techniques for engaging with visitors**
12. **Planning for the future**

# In this chapter

- ▶ **Your missing manual**
  - Battling information overload
  - Seeing the bigger picture
  - Having a “need to know” mentality
- ▶ **Balance conflicting priorities**
  - Making your site easy to use
  - Providing access for all
  - Producing aesthetic appeal
  - Facilitating development
  - Creating killer content
  - Focusing on objectives
- ▶ **Define your role**
  - Having a vision
  - Be an advocate
  - Evangelize your site
  - Managing your content
    - *Populating initial content*
    - *Keeping content fresh*
    - *Ensuring a consistent message and tone*
  - Coordinating your projects
  - Resolving disagreements
- ▶ **Plan for the future**
  - Evaluating your objectives
  - Refining your website
  - Promoting your site

# 1 The secret to a successful website

It is surprising how many times I get asked the million-dollar question:

“What is the secret to a successful website?”

Of course there is no single answer to this question. However that does not stop people trying to find one. Some have suggested it’s about hiring the right web design agency; others have put it down to the importance of usability testing. I have even read articles proposing that well written code is the key.

I would not be foolish enough to suggest I have an answer. However in my decade of working on client websites I have noticed a recurring pattern. The sites that seem to succeed are those that have a well informed, passionate website manager at the helm.

No single thing makes a site successful, but a good website manager will put into place the elements that give a site a fighting chance.

The question should not be “what is the secret to a successful website?” but “how do I become a great website manager?”

The problem is no definitive manual exists explaining how to do the job. In this chapter we start the process of becoming a better website manager by examining the role itself. What does it mean to be a website manager and how can it be done successfully?

## Your Missing Manual

The lack of a manual defining the role of website manager is only part of the problem. There is also a lack of training that normally helps people get to grips with a role.

I am sure it will not be long before training does start to appear. There are already numerous courses for web designers and developers. It seems only natural that website managers will be next. Meanwhile, this book endeavors to be your missing manual.

That is not to say this book is the only resource one can turn to when learning how to be a website manager. Infact, there is a plethora of information both in print and on the web. The problem is not too little information, but too much. Knowing how to handle this plethora of information, focus on what is important and maintain the bigger picture is crucial to the success of your role.

### Battling information overload

In this digital age, we all suffer from information overload. However, when it comes to learning how to run a successful website, the problem seems to be particularly acute.

There are millions of web pages dedicated to every conceivable aspect of website management, from usability testing to search engine placement.

The offline world is no better. There are hundreds of books covering the various facets of web design. Add to these conferences, magazines, seminars, and workshops, and it become impossible to identify what you need to know.

The problem is made worse because sources can often be out-of-date due to the rapid development of the web. This leaves the reader confused as to current best practice.



With so much information available from books, websites, magazines, conferences and even podcasts there is simply too much to learn.

## 1. THE SECRET OF A SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE

So with so many evolving and often conflicting sources, how can a website manager begin to know what is important?



By focusing on the wrong thing it is easier to miss the larger picture. Maintain a broad overview and let experts deal with specifics.

### Seeing the bigger picture

A good starting point is to recognize that a website manager is a generalist rather than a specialist. Think of yourself as a family doctor rather than a brain surgeon.

A family doctor deals with a huge variety of illnesses from the common cold to complex neurological problem. However, he doesn't necessarily treat every illness he sees. He may handle something basic like the common cold, but he will probably not treat a neurological condition, instead referring the patient to a specialist.

In the same way a good website manager will have enough knowledge to identify an issue (an illness if you like) and recognize that a specialist is required to deal with it.

In short, a website manager should focus on the big picture of web design and know enough to 'manage' the specialists that are occasionally required.

### Having a "need to know" mentality

A good website manager should be able to identify what he "needs to know" rather than trying to understand every aspect of the whole.

However, before we start exploring what it is that you need to know about running a website, let us first answer the question I raised earlier "how do I become a great website manager?"

Becoming a great website manager is not just about understanding a web technology or knowing specific pieces of information. It is about grasping the role and approaching it with a certain mentality.

## 1. THE SECRET OF A SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE

I believe there are three principles of website management that encapsulate this mentality:

- ▶ Balancing conflicting priorities
- ▶ Defining your role
- ▶ Planning for the future

If you implement these principles, it will go a long way to ensuring you are a successful website manager. None of these principles are more important than the need to maintain a balance between conflicting priorities.

### Balance conflicting priorities

Balancing the various conflicting priorities in web design is like constructing a building. A building is made up of a series of supports (or pillars). If one pillar is shorter than the others or missing entirely, then the building is in serious danger of collapsing.

As in construction, it is vital that the pillars of web design have equal priority and that the website manager ensures a balance between them all.

There are six pillars of web design:



Every site is built using six disciplines that are vital to its success.

Let us take a moment to examine the role of each pillar and how it affects your projects.

### *Making your site easy to use*

Failing to make your website easy to use can alienate visitors, causing them to give up on your site entirely. Later we investigate ways to make your site more usable through card sorting and user testing.

However, for now, it is important to stress that as with any pillar, too much emphasis on usability can be damaging. A website manager obsessed with usability can undermine business objectives, fail to engage with users emotionally (aesthetics) and even create accessibility problems.

### *Providing access for all*

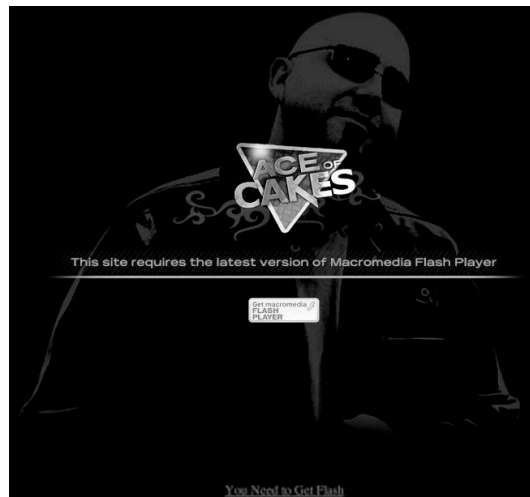
Accessibility is often ignored. However, there are many good reasons for emphasizing it: commercial incentives, legal commitments, and moral obligations.

Many reject accessibility because they believe it is too expensive, difficult to implement or will negatively affect the site's aesthetics. Although there is a grain of truth in these accusations, the current poor state of accessibility on many sites is seriously undermining their effectiveness. Infact it is perfectly possible for good accessibility to exist comfortably alongside our next pillar.

#### More information

Many of the pillars of web design are covered in more depth later in this book. For more information see the following chapters...

- ▶ Chapter 2: Objectives
- ▶ Chapter 4: Aesthetics
- ▶ Chapter 5: Content
- ▶ Chapter 6: Usability
- ▶ Chapter 8: Accessibility
- ▶ Chapter 9: Development



aceofcakestv.com is so concerned with aesthetics that it is impossible to access without the flash plugin. Even if you have the plugin, it is incredibly difficult to navigate.

## Producing aesthetic appeal

Aesthetics refer to the elements that make up the look and feel of your site. These include color, imagery, typography, and layout.

Historically many saw design aesthetics as the most important pillar of web design. For example, it was more important to communicate brand than ensure ease of use. This bias towards design was prevalent in the late 1990s and early 2000s and led to the proliferation of splash screens and a gratuitous use of flash.

A heavy bias towards aesthetics not only damages usability but almost all pillars of web design. Fortunately, we are beginning to see less emphasis on design. We are also seeing a closer working relationship with the other pillars especially development.

## Facilitating development

Development refers to the technical aspects of a project. Many website managers find this pillar intimidating and so choose to ignore it. They want the functionality but are not necessarily concerned with how it is delivered.

Although not all website managers can be expected to understand the complexities of technical development, there is a danger that the constraints and challenges faced by technical developers are ignored.

Also, technical development is evolving at a staggering rate and if website managers do not engage with technical specialists they will miss opportunities to enhance their sites.

Of course, technical development cannot be left to grow unchecked. As some sites built entirely by “techies” show, unfettered technical development can damage usability, accessibility, design and of course content.



One of the problems faced by website managers is being able to interpret the seemingly foreign language spoken by many developers. In chapter 9 we explore some of the “technobabble” and discuss ways of improving communication.

### Creating killer content

Although content creation is a principle role of the website manager it is often a neglected pillars. Perhaps this is because it is not as ‘sexy’ like design or it could be because creating content is hard work.

It is easier to copy and paste content from an existing brochure or out-of-date website than write content from scratch. Of course, the reluctance to write content could be to do with website managers having no experience in writing web copy, let alone having any training.



Your site objectives are the goal that the other areas of web design allow you to reach.

### Focusing on objectives

The site’s “objectives” are the area that most occupies a website manager, and that is as it should be. Objectives refers to the “business rational” behind a site. Why does it exist? What is it trying to achieve? How is success measured?

You could argue that objectives are not a pillar. You write good copy, design an attractive site, and make it usable in an attempt to fulfill your site objectives. Site objectives are the target you are trying to reach, not the method by which you reach it. However, I have found that thinking of objectives alongside usability, accessibility, aesthetic and the rest, creates a more rounded approach that should be encouraged.

No pillar should dominate the others. The aim is to create a balance between all six. If you can achieve this, you have built a good foundation upon which to construct a successful site.

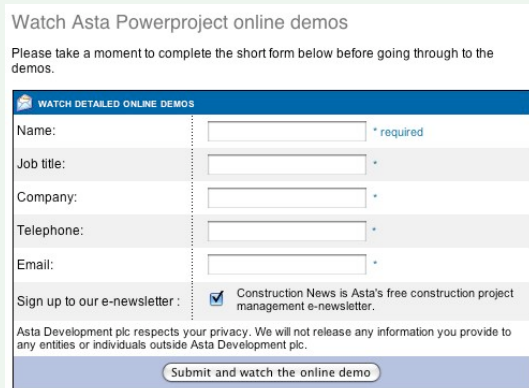
### The dangers of focusing on objectives in isolation

I once worked with a client whose objective was to generate sales leads. They became obsessed with that objective. Infact, they insisted that a user should register before they were allowed to view their product. Each registrant then became a sales lead. However, although they saw a slight increase in leads, ultimately they damaged their business.

Users actively wanted to view their product, however, the barrier to entry was enough to drive them away. These visitors never matured into quality sales leads.

Although some users did complete the form, most were not ready for a sales call. They only registered to access the demo and so the quality of the leads were low. The work involved in following up these leads put a greater burden on the sales team without generating more sales.

If my client had considered the usability issues surrounding forced registration, they might have thought twice. By considering user needs, and not just site objectives, they might have produced fewer leads but the quality would have been higher.



Watch Asta Powerproject online demos

Please take a moment to complete the short form below before going through to the demos.

**WATCH DETAILED ONLINE DEMOS**

Name:  \* required

Job title:

Company:

Telephone:

Email:

Sign up to our e-newsletter:  Construction News is Asta's free construction project management e-newsletter.

Asta Development plc respects your privacy. We will not release any information you provide to any entities or individuals outside Asta Development plc.

Maintaining a balance between different priorities is important, but it is not the whole story, which brings me to defining your role.

## Define your role

The second principle of good website management is to have a clear vision for your role. Being a website manager is one of the most multi-facetted jobs within the web development process. It is because of this diversity that the role is often poorly defined. Failing to give the role boundaries can create two problems.

## 1. THE SECRET OF A SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE

- ▶ **A lack of definition leads to a lack of focus.** Without a job description, a website manager can find himself drawn into unrelated work. Worse still, others can presume something is his responsibility when he does not.
- ▶ **A lack of definition causes anxiety.** There is always a vague feeling that you are not fulfilling your role or are perceived in that way. By defining the role clearly you allay your fears and establish expectations in others.



It is important to define the role of site manager and provide the time and resources to fulfill it.

I recommend defining broad principles of responsibility that you can measure specific tasks against. Here are six roles I think a good website manager should be fulfilling:

- ▶ Visionary
- ▶ Advocate
- ▶ Evangelist
- ▶ Content guardian
- ▶ Project coordinator
- ▶ Referee

Let us address each in turn.

### Having a vision

A good website manager should have a clear vision and be capable of developing it over the long term. They will not, however, shape that vision on their own. It will evolve through discussions among the sites' stakeholders.

Where a site is being developed alongside a web design agency it is good practice to include them in shaping the vision. Unfortunately, web design agencies are often brought on board after the vision has been formed, and so their input is missed. This can cause problems further down the line, but we will cover that in more detail later.

The website manager needs to have a clear picture of what role the site plays within the organization and how that role could be expanded later.

## 1. THE SECRET OF A SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE

### A vision for your site falls into two categories.

First, there is **the core vision**, which is the unshakable objective for the site that doesn't really change over time.

For example, consider a website that sells luxury holidays. Their objective might be to “make planning and booking your dream holiday a pleasurable and intuitive experience, so increasing online sales.”

This simple vision for the site is unlikely to change over time and acts as a measure against which site developments can be compared. Each time they consider a new piece of functionality they can ask themselves “will this increase sales' by making planning and booking easier and more pleasurable?”

The second category is **the roadmap**.

This is a vision of how your site will develop over the coming months and sometimes, years. What kind of new functionality are you planning to add and how is the user base expected to change?

In the case of our example, roadmap items might include adding an itinerary planner or allowing email subscription to the latest offers. It could include details on how to cater to a new market or support upcoming marketing campaigns.

Without a good understanding of the overall vision and roadmap ahead, a site can easily wander off track and lose its focus.

### Who are your stakeholders?



Stakeholders are made up of people and organizations both internally and externally who have some interest in your site. However, the most important stakeholder should always be the end user.

### Be an advocate

Establishing a vision is one thing, maintaining it is quite another. The vision needs an advocate, somebody willing to defend the site against others within the organization that would seek to undermine its focus.

The problem is particularly acute in larger organizations where people have a departmental rather than corporate perspective. This outlook leads to sites becoming victim to internal politics and to individual departments pushing their own agendas.



The website manager should defend the site against varying agendas from different departments within an organisation.

You may remember earlier in this chapter I mentioned a website where users were forced to register before viewing a product demonstration. The problem arose precisely because nobody was defending the vision to generate *high quality* sales opportunities. Instead, the marketing department ran the show and their agenda overruled the sites' vision. There was a monthly target for leads that had to generate. They didn't care about the quality of the leads because that was

“sales' problem.” All they cared about was meeting their quota.

Although the above example is an extreme case, I have seen similar things happen when departments fight over home page space and top-level navigation. The website manager needs to keep in mind the bigger picture and avoid this kind of provincial thinking.

### Evangelize your site

The danger of being a sites' advocate is that you are on the defensive, constantly battling internal stakeholders. This can lead to the site's becoming isolated from the rest of the organization and therefore adding little value.

It is important that your role is not just defensive but offensive too. Continually seek out ways the website can support operations within the company through a dialogue with the various departments within your organization.

A good website manager seeks to understand the challenges faced by others within the company and look for ways that the web could help with those issues. They also evangelize about the benefits of the web and keep colleagues informed about the latest innovation that might apply to their situation.

### Managing your content

Although roles such as visionary, advocate, and evangelist are important they can be somewhat conceptual in nature. The more practical, demanding and time-consuming role is your responsibility for the content of the site.

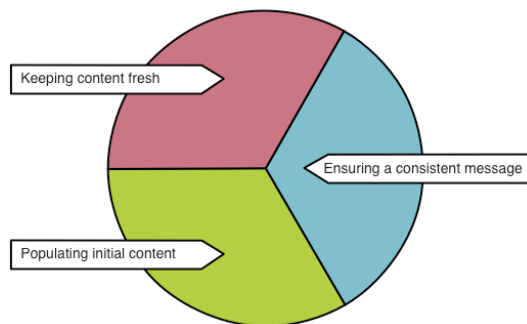
This falls into three categories:

- ▶ Initial content population
- ▶ Keeping content fresh
- ▶ Ensuring a consistent message



By talking to other departmental heads you will quickly identify areas where the website could help meet organizational objective.

The three responsibilities of content guardianship



Management of content falls into three areas: the initial content population, ensuring that content has a consistent tone and keeping that content up-to-date over the long term.

## 1. THE SECRET OF A SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE

### Populating initial content

If content responsibilities are the most time-consuming aspect of a website managers' role, then content population in the initial build phase of a website is the most demanding element of that. Writing and collating content for a website is a huge undertaking and the biggest reason that web projects fall behind schedule.

Website managers often underestimate the time involved in pulling together content from different sources and re purposing it in a format suitable for the web.

### Keeping content fresh

Even after the initial site has been launched your responsibility towards content does not end. There is also a need to keep the content fresh and up-to-date.

A website manager needs to continually source new content, review existing copy and update as necessary. New content such as news stories are required to keep users coming back for more.

### Ensuring a consistent message and tone

The job of generating content can become too big for a single person. You may choose to solve this problem by reuse existing content or turning to others for help. These approaches are perfectly valid. However, they do present the danger of inconsistency in both tone and content. It is the website managers job to ensure that the site speaks with a single unified voice.



Without a website manager ensuring consistent tone a website can appear to have a split personality with different sections written in different ways.

You will need to review each new piece of content added to a your site. Does it use the same tone of voice used elsewhere on the site? Is the writing style the same? Are the facts quoted in line with what is already being shown?

## 1. THE SECRET OF A SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE

In chapter 5 (*Creating killer content*) we will talk more about generating content but for now all you need is a clear picture of the manager's role in the process. That role involves, coordinating, generating, and standardizing content.

### Coordinating your projects

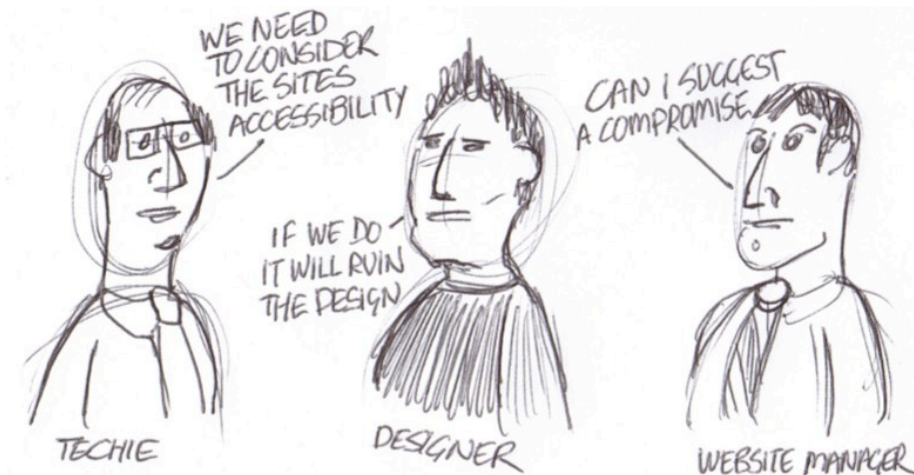
Content contributors are not the only people who need managing in a web design project. There are designers, developers, usability experts, hosting companies, and many more.

Although frequently the website manager turns to a web design agency to handle the management of these roles, it is inevitable that some management will be required internally. For example, internal sign off is often required for project components such as; budget, design, and content.

Unfortunately the final role most website managers have to fulfill is unofficial referee.

### Resolving disagreements

Running a website is about compromise. There are compromises in content and which sections of the organization get the highest priority. There are compromises between the different pillars of web design and there are compromises over budget and time scales.



It is your job as website manager to resolve disagreements over priorities

## 1. THE SECRET OF A SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE

The various stakeholders have different perspectives on what is important. It is the website managers responsibility to break any stalemates that occur by finding the middle ground. Ultimately, somebody has to be the decision maker and that is the website manager.

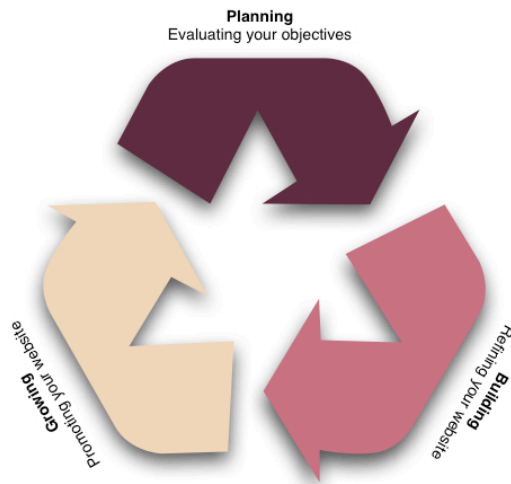
Recognizing your role is an important step in being a great website manager, but it is not the end of the journey. It is also important to realize that the role is an ongoing one and that the work of a website manager is never done.

# Planning for the future

Many organizations underestimate the enormity of the job faced by website managers, because they fail to grasp that it is a long term commitment. This explains why so few organizations have full time website managers despite their website being considered an important asset. Although there is a general acceptance that a website manager is required to “sort the website” there is little conception that this is an ongoing role. A website

manager is needed through the entire life cycle of a website to ensure that it evolves and remains successful.

Let’s look in more detail at what is involved in running a website post launch.



Website management is a cycle of planning, building, and growing your site. You should be constantly evaluating, and making changes based on what you learn. If you do not your site will stagnate and eventually die.

## Evaluating your objectives

A website manager should be constantly evaluating the website’s objectives and asking if its overall vision and direction need changing. This does not need to happen on a daily basis but should be done every few months.

# 1. THE SECRET OF A SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE

When reviewing your site it is important to consider questions such as:

- ▶ Have the underlying objectives of the website changed?
- ▶ How is the site performing against its success criteria and are they still relevant?
- ▶ What is the competition doing and how are we performing against them?
- ▶ How has the target audience changed and what do they say about the site?

In the next chapter, we will look in detail at this subject. All you need to know at this point is that your objectives need to be reviewed regularly and that you should be refining the site based on changes that arise.

## Refining your website

Responding to changes in site objectives can manifest itself in various forms. For example, if the success criteria for the site are not being met, then that needs to be addressed. Equally, if the competition is luring away your visitors then the site needs to be altered to encourage them back.

This continual “tweaking” of your site happens in three ways:

- ▶ Changes to the design,
- ▶ The introduction of new functionality,
- ▶ The addition, deletion and editing of content.

For example, the luxury holiday service I mentioned earlier might respond to increased competition by adding a flight price comparison tool (new functionality). This would be appealing to users and will draw them away from the competition. Alternatively, they might add reviews of existing destinations (new content) to encourage repeat visitors.



Constantly evaluate your site looking for ways the design, content or functionality can be improved.

## 1. THE SECRET OF A SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE

Finally, they could refine the design based on user opinion to make it easier to navigate (changes to design).

Responding to user comments is often the best way of refining your website. Later we will address how to gather user feedback and use it to inform the changes you make. However, first we need to address the last of a website managers' ongoing roles, site promotion.

### Promoting your site

Budget is rarely assigned to employ a specialist in site promotion and so it often falls to the website manager to fulfill this role. The visitors coming to your website will decline if you do not actively and regularly promote it.

There are four approaches that can be combined to effectively promote your site:

Type	Description
Offline promotion	Offline promotion includes letterheads, business cards, signage, phone systems and other marketing collateral.
Email marketing	Email can be a powerful marketing tool to drive new traffic and a good way of encouraging existing users to return to your site.
Search mechanisms	Search mechanisms are more than good placement on Google. It also includes pay per click campaigns and social networking tools.
Guerilla marketing	Guerilla marketing is a catchall term for low cost marketing methods. It includes techniques like forum spamming, viral marketing, blogging and even podcasting.

You can promote a website in a number of different ways. The table above gives you a basic outline of the key methods we will be exploring in more depth later in this book.

Later we will explore how a website manager might begin to promote his site through the above techniques. For now it is important to understand that site promotion requires a regular commitment (either internally or externally). It is important to decide right from the outset who will be responsible for this work.

# Next Actions

We started this chapter by asking “what makes a successful website.” Our answer was “a good website manager.” This led us to ask “how do I become a good website manager?” We have looked at the role and its associated responsibilities attempting to understand it better. However, I would like to end this chapter by proposing three tangible actions you can take to embrace the role.

- ▶ **Action one: Formalize the role** – It is important that your role of website manager is formalized. The best way to formalize the role is for it to be written into your job description. At the very least your responsibilities should be clearly defined and time allocated to the role. Go to management and discuss exactly what is expected.
- ▶ **Action two: Set aside regular time** – Just because the role has theoretical time allocated to it does not mean your website will get the attention it deserves. Try to ring fence a certain amount of time every week that will be dedicated to the website. Don’t allow more pressing responsibilities to push that time out. This will allow you to review the progress of your site and ensure it is updated and promoted.
- ▶ **Action three: Review and plan before proceeding** – Even if you believe you have a clear picture of what needs doing on your website I would encourage you to pause for a moment. Set aside a block of time to review the current state of your online presence. With deadlines immanent, and management keen to see results it is tempting to focus on site build or promotion. However resist the temptation to rush in. Plan your next step.

Planning is crucial to the success of a website. It is where you understand the background to your web project, define its objectives and decide how its success will be measured. Planning allows opportunity to assess the competition, review your existing site, and better understand your target audience. Without careful planning a project is left floundering. It is hardly surprising then that it is planning we address in the next chapter.