The

Web Site
Owner's Check List

If it's broken, fix it.

Introduction

This is a check list aimed primarily at web site owners who are looking to gain confidence in the solidity of their web sites. Having said that, designers and developers can make use of it as a pre-delivery check list as well.

It's by no means comprehensive but I've tried to include the most important factors that make a web site great. It's also by no means finished. The web is a constantly evolving ecosystem and todays best practices may well become obsolete or be superseded. On top of that, my own skills as a designer and developer are constantly improving and I'll be adding the lessons I learn daily into the mix over time.

The entries are categorised using five adjectives which should be characteristics of all web sites:

- Findable
- Usable
- Desirable
- Maintainable
- Protectable

Each entry has its own page consisting of a question to ask of your site, a discussion of the issues and suggested solutions.

You can focus on each section in turn or just one specific section you may think you have a problem with.

You can obviously read the entire book cover to cover but that may be overkill for a first pass over your site.

Alternatively, you can use the following 'tracks' if you have a particular purpose in mind. Just read each page number in the list for the particular track you want to follow.

Quick Check Up

(The most important stuff)

F1, F3, F9, U1, U5, U13, U19, U25, U28, D3, D4, D6, M6, P5

Under the Hood

(Technical checks)

F6, F7, F8, F14, F15, F16, F17, F18, F19, U7, U16, U17, U21, U22, U30, D1, D5, D22, D23, D24, M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, P2, P3, P4, P5

Typography

(Text that works)

U27, D1, D2, D7, D8, D9, D11, D12, D13, D14, D15, D16, D17, D18, D19, D20, D21, M2, P2

Navigation

(Efficient and easy menus etc.)

F4, F5, F6, F7, F8, F18, F19, F20, U4, U5, U9, U10, U11, U12, U14, U27, D3, D21, D25

Layout

(Structuring design elements)

F4, F5, F20, U2, U4, U5, U7, U14, U27, U28, D1, D2, D3, D5, D7, D8, D9, D11, D12, D13, D14, D19, D20, D22, D23, M2

Be Visible in Search Engine Rankings

F1

? For relevant keywords does your content appear on Google's first page of results?

! Rule of thumb: every half page of results above you means a loss of half your search audience.

Obviously this depends on your business and the keywords being searched, the proportion of business you get through search etc. but the principle holds true: get high up in the SERPs.

✓ There are essentially two ways of getting high up in the rankings. Make sure your content has relevant keywords in it. The content of your content is the main way search engines decide whether you're relevant to a searcher's query. The second way is to boost your link juice. If other people, who the search engines consider relevant, link to your content then that's a massive pointer that your content is also relevant. Both of these need to be done 'naturally'. Place relevant keywords in your posts but don't just stuff them in there all over the place. Add comments to blogs with a link back to your content, but don't spam them with irrelevant junk. Getting keywords in your content is relatively easy but building link juice and authority is a much longer process. Focus on Google because they have consistently had over 80% of the search market and to a lesser extent Bing and Yahoo! (who have around 3%-5% each)

Promote Your Site Off-line

F2

? Is your web site address on everything you produce?

! The obvious things are advertising copy, stationery, product packaging and email signatures but don't forget the less obvious. Consider what precedence or prominence to give to your web site address.

✓ Does your personal Facebook profile have a link to your web site for example? If you have an advertising location, consider the viewer. If they're driving past your home improvements business van, are they going to remember your mobile phone number or are they going to remember your web address? If your web address isn't memorable enough then consider purchasing another, possibly very short, domain name which redirects to your main site.

Analyse Your Traffic

F3

? Do you understand how people use your site? Have you acted on that information?

! You can find out a surprising amount about how your web site is being used and you should really be making good use of this data. Which parts of your site are most engaging? What paths do people take through your site? What are the exit points? What proportion of users run through your checkout process to completion? Knowing this stuff is only half the battle though. You need to do something with the data.

✓ Run the various analytics tools, over a period appropriate to your site, to get a good set of baseline data. Once you've gathered the data, you need to turn it into information, action and improvement. Identify problems, find potential solutions, implement them *one at a time* and gather more data. Check for changes in the data and rinse and repeat. If you can, set two alternative versions of your site running at the same time for better quality data.

Provide a Local Search Function

? Can users search the content on your site from within your site?

! Once users are on your site you really want to keep them there. Sometimes a user will complete his initial task and be spurred on to further action on your site. You need to make that easy for them. Alternatively, a user may come to your site not knowing exactly which piece of content they need. Make it easy for them to find what they're looking for.

✓ Is search available from every point on your site? Is the search functionality located in the same place on every page? Does this search function produce sensible and useful results (at the very least does it combine multiple search terms using 'and' rather than 'or')?

Highlight Related Content

F5

? Are you encouraging users to explore your site further?

! When a user views a piece of content, present them with links to a few related items. This is, in some ways, a pre-emptive local search. Your aim is to anticipate where a user might be interested in going next and to effortlessly facilitate that next step for them. Not only does it make it more efficient, it reduces the friction involved in moving on to another piece of content.

✔ This can be a little tricky to pull off. If your site is small enough then you can do this manually. If it's not, then you've got to really go for it big time. Be prepared to invest a lot of effort in producing a smart automated system. If you try to do this on the cheap it will just produce unrelated garbage which will in turn detract from your user experience. Better to leave well alone in this case.

Maintain Inbound Links

F6

? Are you confident nobody has invalid or outdated links to missing content?

! If you answered in the affirmative, you're wrong. Or at least you will be soon. Somebody somewhere, even if it's not you, is going to publish the wrong URL or move something or otherwise break an inbound link. It will happen.

✓ You can monitor the situation using Google's Webmaster Tools which will show you a list of the content it failed to find while crawling your site.

You should also set up your 404 page to send you notifications whenever a user enters your domain via a broken link.

Take prompt action when you see problems as these things tend to cluster; for example, when somebody publishes a bad link, you're likely to see multiple uses of that link in a short space of time.

Help People With Bad Inbound Links

F7

? When people encounter bad links to your content, are you being helpful enough?

! Encountering a 404 is both annoying and often bewildering. The user wants to know what just happened (not everyone is familiar with the meaning of 404), why it happened, how to stop it happening again, and they need options to enable progress.

✔ Look at the HTTP referrer to determine what caused the problem. If appropriate send a notification to the site administrator and let the user know that's been done. If it's an external issue then let the user know who to contact for a fix.

Apologise if it's your fault and be polite if it's not.

Present the user with a link to the home page of your site, links to possibly related content based on the URL of the failed link, and a search box for further exploration.

Know When an Outbound Link Breaks

? Will you know if something you link to disappears?

! Getting a 404 on an outbound link is even worse than a 404 on an inbound link. The user will definitely associate it with an inability to maintain your own site or keep the content fresh.

✓ In fact this is usually not your fault (you did check all your links before launch right?) but the web is not a static place and things do disappear or move. There are plenty of tools about to check your site for missing outbound links though so there's no excuse for having them really. At least in the long term. You need to actively stay on top of this link checking though.

Unique Page Titles

F9

? Does each page on your site have a unique title in the browser tab?

! The title of a page should be a succinct summary of the content of the page. As such it's an excellent place for search engines to go searching for ranking data. So they do. Search engines *love* page titles and they can really boost your rankings. But if they're not unique Google may consider it duplicate content and penalise you.

✓ Page titles need to be unique and they need to accurately represent the contents of the page they refer to. If you've got a lot of content your CMS should be generating unique titles for you. If not you'll need to set them manually in the <head> section of your pages.

Prefer Keywords to Branding in Titles

F10

? Does your brand identity take precedence in your titles or are you focused on keywords?

! Your brand identity will probably be unique, or nearly so. Consequently, your content will naturally appear at the top of SERPs when searched against your brand. Keywords related to your content or offering will be used by your competition as well.. Your site will need help to rise up the SERPs for these keywords much more so than for your brand.

Searchers will almost always be searching for keywords rather than brand identity so reflect that in your titles. The people you really want to attract are those who are interested in your offering but who don't know about you specifically. They'll find you via keywords rather than via your brand.

✓ Make sure content related keywords come first in the title and branding is secondary.

Provide Helpful Titles

F11

? Will a user reading your page title gain an accurate feel for the page content?

! Although titles are important for SEO, your page titles also show up as the titles of your SERP entries. Will they attract searchers to your content and will the content they find there honestly reflect what the title suggested would be there?

✓ Make sure your titles entice the user. But don't be dishonest about what they're being enticed towards. Don't stuff keywords into the title at the expense of their attractiveness to humans.

Keep Titles Short

F12

? Are any of your page titles longer than 70 characters?

! Although Google uses all of your title when calculating page rank, it will only display up to 70 characters in the SERPs.

✓ Check your <title> tags in the <head> section of your pages and make sure you get your message to searchers across in those first 70 characters. Note that you can use this cut off point to add keywords into longer titles without detracting from what searchers will see in the SERPs.

Know Your Keywords

F13

? Have you thought through your keyword choices for titles and content?

! The success of your content depends to a large extent on the way it is linked to search terms by Google. Choosing the right keywords to include in your content, and titles, helps enormously here. Think about what users might enter into Google if they were looking for your content. Also think of variations on that theme.

✓ There are a variety of keyword analysis tools available to help you find alternative keywords and to show you the popularity of them in search queries. Use them to influence your content. Don't pursue this to the point that your content becomes unnatural though. It's easy to just stuff keywords in but users will find your writing stilted and awkward if you do it too much.

Meta Description Tags

?   Are you targeting meta description tags at users and keeping them short?

!   Meta description tags, like title tags live in the <head> section of your HTML. They show up below the title in SERPs and as such are vital for enticing users to view your content. Google doesn't use them to determine your ranking though.

✓   Aim your meta descriptions firmly at human users rather than search engine spiders. They get cut off at 160 characters so keep them shorter than this.

Alt Attributes on Images

F15

? Have you included alt tags for all your images?

! Search engines don't understand images so they look at data associated with the images to determine their content. One such piece of data is the alt attribute which can be added to img tags and acts as an alternate, textual description of the image.

Screen readers will also use the alt attribute to describe an image to visually impaired users.

✓ Go through all your img tags and make sure there are alt attributes and that those attributes provide a good description of the image being referred to by the img tag. Many validation tools will flag up images missing alt attributes to help automate this process for you.

Friendly URLs

F16

? Do any of your URLs contain punctuation, random characters or non-readable text?

! Many software generated, dynamic pages such as blog posts and product pages will have URLs generated for them. Often these will be things like http://example.com/cat3?p=67567234&s=xl&c=taupe This is not helpful for SEO and it's not helpful for users either.

✓ Try to set your CMS up to generate user friendly URLs. Instead of the above example, something like http://example.com/pants/cotton-cargo-taupe-extra-large is much more searchable and readable.

Friendly File Names

F17

? Are your file names descriptive of the file's contents?

! Although this applies to all the files on your site because a sensible filename aids maintainability, here, we're talking about your publicly accessible assets. For example; images, downloadable documents, audio and video files etc. In a similar fashion to alt attributes on images, a friendly and descriptive filename makes for better SEO and better access for assistive technologies.

✓ Make sure your file names include descriptive keywords and avoid auto-generated file names. For example, prefer two-cute-tabby-kittens.jpg over dscf0564.jpg

XML Site Map

? Have you produced an XML site map and fed it to search engines?

! Although not strictly necessary since search engines will usually manage to crawl your site fully on their own, an XML site map can speed up this process significantly. The faster you get your site indexed, the faster you can start generating revenue.

✓ Don't bother trying to produce these by hand. There are plenty of tools out there that will make this a pretty painless task. Once done, submit it to Google Webmaster Console.

HTML Site Map

F19

? Have you produced an HTML site map for your users?

! You might think this is a bit old-school but it does have its uses, even today. An HTMl site map allows your users to get a quick overview of the content of your site. It also allows search engines to spread page rank through your site. It's particularly useful if you've got lots of content, possibly old, archived content, which doesn't really warrant a place in your main navigation.

✓ If you've already produced an XML site map for search engine submission then you can use this as the basis for your HTML site map very easily. If you haven't then go ahead and produce one now. Kill two birds with one stone.

Location, Location, Location

F20

? Are users always aware of their location on your site?

! Users will ask the following questions while using your site. How did I get here? How do I get back? How do I jump to page X? How much do I still have to do?

Consider these questions in the context of your static pages, product hierarchies, check-out process, registration process etc.

✓ The stand-out tool here is breadcrumbs. Usually shown just below the navigation this shows each step from the home page to the current page. For multi-step processes a similar process shows the named steps of the process and the user's current position within them.

Goal!

? What is the primary goal of your web site? Do you have secondary goals?

! Just as your business needs a primary goal which acts as a focus for all your efforts, so too does your web site. Define this goal well before implementing it in your site.

It could be an e-commerce gateway. It could be a portfolio. It could be support for a marketing campaign. It could be to raise awareness of an upcoming event.

It's purpose doesn't need to be fixed in time and can change in response to current needs.

Secondary goals should support, and certainly not conflict with, your primary goal.

✓ Once the primary goal of your web site is well defined and understood, analyse every part of your site. Make sure everything contributes to this primary goal. If a component is supporting a secondary goal, it must be at worst neutral towards the primary goal.

U1

Responsive Design

? Are you catering for mobile devices and tablets as well as traditional desktop users?

U2

! It's no longer rational to ignore the mobile market. Your site must be able to respond to differing screen sizes, resolutions and orientations on a wide variety of devices.

✓ Test your site on a variety of devices. Does it function acceptably on all of them? Consider which components can be removed from mobile versions to save bandwidth and screen space. Use responsive techniques such as CSS media queries and fluid grid layouts.

Know Your Audience

? Have you identified your target audience?

U3

! It's almost impossible for a web site to be all things to all men. Trying to do so will merely dilute your message and you'll end up failing to appeal to anybody.

✓ Firmly limit and define your audience. Then make sure you're catering for them through your message, your tone, your interaction design, your styling, your level of interaction and your emphasis on social media.

Focus on the User

U4

? Is your site focused on the user or is it a showcase for you or your designer?

! Whilst it's important to tell people how great you are, never lose sight of the fact that the user comes to your site wanting to achieve something. Convincing them that you're the right one for the job is only a small part of that. Keep it in perspective.

Your designer has even less business showing off on your site than you do. There's nothing wrong with a link back to his site in the footer but make sure his ego is subservient to the needs of your users.

✓ Limit news about yourself to one or two critical pieces, perhaps your latest award or press release. Put all the rest on a news or about us page.

Make sure your designer has use cutting edge features only when appropriate and where they have good cross-browser support. Limit avant-garde design experiments to his portfolio unless they work and suit your site.

Call To Action

? Are you being clear about what the user is supposed to do to fulfil his needs?

U5

! When a user comes to your site he should have an agenda. You should have one too. Ideally the two should be aligned. Your site should make it simple for the user to perform the actions he needs to fulfil his needs.

Additionally, you might need to steer the user down a certain path if you want to modify his intended actions. Don't try to completely subvert those intentions though.

You must also cater to the user who is coming to your site blind with little knowledge of what you can do for him.

✓ If you want the user to subscribe, then make your Subscribe Now call to action button the most prominent focal point on the site.

The user may not be quite ready yet though. In this case, you need to persuade him that clicking that big Subscribe Now button is the right course of action. The rest of your content should be focused on persuading him to push the button. The most prominent secondary content should be the most persuasive towards that end.

Provide introductory material for the uninitiated visitor.

Banish Competition

? Are you being clear about why the user should choose you rather than the competition?

! When a user arrives at your site there's a good chance he's already favouring you over the competition. You can't know this for sure though.

U6

✓ Assume that a user is making a comparison between your site and your competition's. Make sure you're highlighting the benefits of your services over your rivals'. In order to do this you must first be confident of your position in relation to your competitors.

Be Accessible

? Is your site suited to those with disabilities or those using assistive technologies?

U7

! Not everybody who uses your site will be looking at it. Many will be using screen readers or other assistive technology. Even those who aren't using such technology may well benefit from considered design.

✓ Use alt attributes and descriptive file names for images. Clearly identify sections. Allow header sections to be skipped so screen readers can go straight to the body content. Consider using larger default fonts, particularly if your audience is older. Make sure you site works if users change font sizes or use zoom controls. Avoid low-contrast colour schemes. Limit subtle design effects to non-critical areas.

Feed Back

? Do you ever leave a user unsure about what they've just done?

U8

! Take every opportunity to reassure the user that what they're doing is correct. Users often need reassurance that the magic box is doing its magic—people often press the button to call a lift repeatedly. Even when the light is lit.

Don't surprise people. Unless it's in a good way.

Indicate the level of progress so far.

✓ When the user clicks on a button provide instant feedback to let him know something has happened or is happening.

Make progress bars progress smoothly and never replace one completed bar with another empty one.

Spinning wheels need a percentage indicator if they're going to spin for more than a couple of seconds.

Be Consistent in Your Navigation

? Do you ever move things without telling your users?

U9

! People are very good at learning where to look for things. Once they've used your navigation a couple of times they'll know where to find things in it.

✓ Navigation elements should be the same, site wide. Don't surprise users by changing the navigation from page to page.

One possible exception is if you have a very specialised section of your site that warrants its own navigation. Consider a second navigation element in this instance as a supplement to the main navigation.

Differentiate Your Products

? Do you make you're alternative offerings clearly different?

U10

! If you offer a free and a paid subscription then make sure the user is clear on the benefits of the paid version. There has to be clear water between the two.

✓ Use comparison charts or side by side product panels to make it easy for users to decide.. List costs as well as both features and benefits.

Categorise Clearly

? Do your users always pick the right navigation option?

! The purpose of navigation is to allow users to easily find the correct content. Choosing the wrong navigation branch is frustrating and frustration often results in lack of attention on the web. Keep your users on your site by making sure they find what they want on the first attempt.

✓ Look at each level of your navigation. Be sure that each option defines a category with clear and unambiguous boundaries which allow a user to quickly determine when the content he's searching for will be found.

U11

Balance Breadth and Depth in Navigation

? Does your navigational hierarchy balance number of choices with number of steps, to maximise search efficiency?

U12

! Navigation elements are almost always modelled on trees. Each navigation level represents a selection from a number of choices. The depth is defined by the maximum number of choice steps needed to reach any piece of content. The more choices per level, the fewer levels are required. The more levels, the easier the individual choices become.

✓ Maximise navigation efficiency by balancing the number of choices at each level and the depth of the navigation tree. Show a slight preference for more choices over more levels as each level requires a physical mouse click rather than simply a visual selection.

It Was Just a Flash In The Pan

? Have you banished Flash from your site yet?

U13

! Flash is dying. Abode are stopping support and development. iPhones don't support it at all. As a general rule, users tend to find it annoying. It lends itself to the implementation of non-standard interfaces. It is opaque to search engines which ruins your SEO.

✓ There's nothing that can be done in Flash that can't be done equally as well or better in alternative, modern web technologies. HTML5 supports audio and video tags with good browser support. SVG and HTML5 canvas provide excellent animation support. JavaScript provides excellent user interface support.

Avoid Pagination

? Are you using pagination in long articles?

U14

! Pagination should be used as a way to bind similar content together rather than as a way to split large content into bit-sized chunks. Unfortunately pagination is often used as a way to increase ad impressions. Split an article into seven pages and you get seven times as many impressions per reader. It's a technique which appears to work on the face of it. However, you'll annoy users, which means your content won't get read. You're also

✓ Keep content that belongs together, together. Use pagination only for things like slideshows.

Hidden Assets

? Are all intended assets displayed on your pages?

! It's generally quite straightforward to ensure your content doesn't go missing. There are tools to check your site for missing internal links and your active 404 page will tell you about broken inbound links. Content within pages is more difficult to track though.

✓ Make sure all your assets are displayed where they're supposed to be displayed. The classic failure point is a missing image.

U15

Load Quickly

? Does you site load as fast as it should?

U16

! It's often quoted that users will give you four seconds to load your page before going elsewhere. While that may be a slight exaggeration it is true that you need to load very quickly these days. Note that people with slow connections *will* accept slower load times than those with fast connections. It's relative load times that count.

✓ Use network analysis tools to check your load times. Optimise your site by reducing large image sizes or resolutions. Minimise your CSS and JS assets. Make sure your CSS selectors are efficient.

Make Scripting Optional

? Does everything fall back gracefully when scripting is turned off?

U17

! Even today, not everybody is able to use scripting. There are people who need your site to run with JavaScript disabled. This applies particularly to people using screen readers but also to certain specific sectors such as security contractors who run tightly locked down systems.

✔ Ideally design your site from the bottom up without the need for JavaScript and layer additional functionality on top of that which takes advantage of scripting features. Consider disabling parts of your site. For example, there's not much point trying to display a graphical portfolio to blind people. Just let your site fall back to a textual description for them.

Don't Auto-play Media

? Does your site automatically start playing a video or audio file when it loads?

U18

! Auto-playing media is really annoying if you don't like the music or aren't interested in the video. Really, really annoying if you're in an office.

✓ Always make sure any media on your site is set to pre-load (if you want) but not play. Straightforward.

Get to the Point

? Is your content wordy? Do you expect users to read everything?

! Keep it short and snappy online. Attention spans are shorter here on the web. Users don't read everything. They don't even read top to bottom.

✓ Use points of focus and short text snippets to draw attention and get your message across as the user scans the page.

U19

Be Contactable

? Is it obvious how to contact you and can users choose how?

U20

! A surprising number of visitors to your site will simply be people looking for your contact details. Don't disappoint them. Be aware that not everybody likes Facebook, not everybody wants to talk to you on the phone and not everybody wants to sit and wait for you to scan your inbox.

✓ Make your contact details obvious. The conventional place to look is in the top right of the header. It doesn't heave to go there but prefer that spot. You don't have to put all your contact details there. Maybe just your preferred contact method and a link to a page listing your other contact methods. Make sure you provide plenty of options. At the very least provide a phone number, email and one or more social networks. Your street address and a map may or may not be appropriate depending on your business model.

Don't Get Spammed

? Is your e-mail address listed on your site in plain text form?

! Although spam filtering tools have largely removed the problem of dealing with junk e-mail these days, it still makes sense to limit the problem if you can.

✓ Publish your email address in encrypted form to avoid spam. There are various tools available to help with this.

U21

Avoid CAPTCHAs

? Are you making users answer CAPTCHAs to access your content?

U22

! Although they do work as a mechanism of avoiding spam comments, automated registrations and the like, they do put a barrier in the way of your users.

✓ Try to avoid using them if possible. Certainly avoid using them by default and wait until you have a problem before introducing them. Depending on your usage pattern there are tools which can avoid the need for them altogether even if you're subject to a lot of spam.

Simplify Registration

?   Do you ask your users to register?

!   Do you really need users to register to use your site? It's a definite turn off. You might want to gather e-mail addresses for marketing reasons or you might be holding personalised data on them. Both are perfectly valid reasons to require registration but weight up the pros and cons. If you do need them to register, you'll really annoy them if they have to fill out pages and pages of data to do so.

✓   Avoid registration if possible and make it easy if you must use it. For example, there's often no need for a username and an e-mail address. Just use the e-mail address as the username. The most basic login is simply an e-mail address and a password. Anything else can often be filled in as part of an optional profile.

U23

Blog If You Need To

? Would your site benefit from a blog or forums?

U24

! Both blogs and forums are excellent ways to increase user engagement and build a sense of community. Blogs are more focused towards you being a central provider of information to your users whereas a forum allows for much closer interaction between your users. Both can be excellent ways to build passion and community as well as a great source of knowledge and feedback.

✓ Consider providing a forum and/or a blog depending on your particular needs and those of your users. Do not underestimate the effort required to maintain either.

Go Social

? Are you avoiding social media?

! Social media is a tremendous way to connect with your users and in many ways is a replacement for traditional blogs and forums.

✓ For a general audience consider both Facebook and Twitter as pretty essential but use Google+ as a way to engage with people who are passionate about a particular subject area. Don't neglect niche networks such as Pinterest, Instagram and the like; they're likely to be extremely valuable if they fit your market.

U25

Good Form

? Do your forms work?

! Judging by their often awful implementation, forms can be one of the more difficult aspects of a site to get right. Burt there's no need for them to be that terrible. Follow a few simple usability rules and your users will thank you.

U26

✓ Do they gather the right info? Do they gather irrelevant info? Do they gather the info with as few steps as possible? Are your questions clear and unambiguous? Do you thank the user once they've completed the form? Is progress on multiple page forms clearly indicated? Does the tab order within a form make sense? This is particularly important for accessibility but lots of people prefer to tab through them anyway.

Define Clickable Areas

? Is it clear what is a clickable area and what is not?

! Users expect consistency both within your site and in relation to what they've experienced on other sites. Don't make it difficult for people to work out which parts of your design are active and which are passive, it's just cognitive workload that will drive them away. Always make life simple for the user.

✓ Underlined text should be a link so don't underline text simply for emphasis; use bolding or italics for that. Links should be underlined. Consider using rollover functionality, especially for image links. Keep links big enough to be easily clicked on. Link size is particularly important for touch screen users.

U27

Don't Require Horizontal Scrolling

? Does your site ever present a horizontal scroll bar?

U28

! Avoid horizontal scrolling like the plague as users expect to scroll vertically but horizontal scrolling is awkward. More importantly, the user will need to scroll left and right for every line of text rather than every page as is the case with vertical scrolling. This combination of awkwardness and high frequency make the action a terrible one to impose on your users.

✓ Test your site at multiple screen sizes on multiple devices. Try shrinking your windows. Try selecting different font sizes in your browser. If horizontal scrollbars appear at any point, you need to re-design your layout code. Use fluid layouts and/or CSS media queries to do this.

Stay Fresh

? Is any of your content out of date or no longer accurate?

! Make sure content you publish stays relevant. There's nothing wrong with keeping old articles that relate to things that are no longer current but if you have advice for people that is meant to last then you'll need to keep it up to date with new best practices.

✓ Typical failure points are products no longer for sale, staff members moving to a new job or change of contact details.

U29

Choose Your Host Carefully

? Are you on the right kind of host for your site?

U30

! Hosting can be a tricky thing to get right and it's not something you want to be changing very often. Ideally you want all you sites hosted with the same company. You need to gather good data about your sites usage patterns to make sure you've got the right hosting package.

✓ Do you need a dedicated host or is your site small enough to be OK on a shared box or a virtual server? What SLA have you got in place? How close are you to bumping up against bandwidth or storage limits? Have you got enough databases? How good id the support package?

Use a Grid

? Is your page layout structured around a grid?

! Design elements (including lines of text) need to align both horizontally and vertically where possible. This creates a sense of order, structure and rhythm and makes it easier to read your site, both its structure and its content.

D1

✓ Grids don't need to be fixed, there are plenty of fluid grid CSS layouts available, both stand-alone or as part of a larger framework. Make sure your line-height and font-sizes work together to provide a vertical rhythm to your text whether it be headlines or body copy. Make sure these settings also tie in to your image sizes so you can flow text around images with elegance.

Chunk your Copy

? Have you broken up large chunks of text?

! It's harder to read on screen than it is to read in print. Not only that, but attention spans tend to be shorter as well.

D2

✓ Keep your copy short and to the point. Sentences should be short and copy should generally be broken into paragraphs using visual elements to do so where appropriate.

Clear Page Structure

? Are your pages clearly and consistently structured?

! Users expect a certain structure to a web page. There are plenty of good reasons to break the rules here but don't break them just for the sake of it. If you're after efficiency then pander to the user's expectations.

D3

✓ Are there clear header, footer, navigation, sidebar and body sections? Header and footer bracket the page vertically. Navigation separates the header from the main content (although it can appear in a sidebar instead). Sidebars bracket the main content horizontally. Sometimes there's only one (either left or right is fine), sometimes there's one on the left and one on the right.

No Typos Please

? Are you sure there are no typos on your site?

! Typos are not good. They're difficult to spot and searching for them seems like a lot of work for little gain. But the appearance of typos detracts significantly from the professional feel of your site.

D4

✓ Weather its grammar or spelling, proof carefully, forwards and backwards. Use a spell checker but only for a first pass. And please, please don't let there be any in this. Apart from the two deliberate ones.

No Placeholders

? Have you checked every part of your site for placeholder text or images?

! It's not uncommon to find a lorem ipsum caption to a kitten image in some dark corner of a site. They won't be in your main content because you'll have spotted them during development, but they may well be lurking in initial test content or in obscure articles.

D5

✓ Make sure you've replaced all placeholder copy and images. Always use a standard piece of placeholder text and a standard source for placeholder images. It's so much easier to grep your source or search your site's database for 'lorem' or 'kitten' than manually checking everything for errant placeholders.

Appeal to Your Audience

? Is the site aesthetically appealing to your target audience?

! While you and your designer might love your design, that's not rally the issue at hand. The site must be designed to appeal to your target audience.

D6

✓ Make sure you design choices are set in the context of your users. Consider their aspirations, sense of style, politics, peer groups and other web sites they might be using.

Have a Consistent Feel

? Does the design feel coherent and consistent right across the site?

! When analysing this it's important to switch between the low level detail of typeface choice, colour, shadow, contrast etc. and the overall look of the page. The overall feel is a composite of the individual design choices you make.

D7

✓ Are typefaces, shapes, contrast, weight and colour used consistently through the entire site? Does each page have a consistent ratio of content to white space? Does it tie into your existing branding and marketing material?

Focal Points

? Do your pages have clear focal points which the user will hit as he scans the content?

! A user's eyes don't process a web page linearly. The tend to skip from one point of focus to another. It's important to understand the general order in which this scanning takes place and the locations which will form points of focus and how those locations interact with each other.

D8

✓ There are tools which will help with this analysis but what usually happens is that this process of picking focal points is done during initial design but then the focal points are lost as the page content is developed. Always re-examine a finished page and consider the order in which it will be scanned. Make adjustments as necessary.

Let it Breathe

? Is there room for the content to breathe?

! Yes there's only a limited amount of space on a web page and the temptation is there to cram everything in. This is particularly true on mobile sites where every pixel counts. Sometimes less is more though and it can be a very powerful design statement.

D9

✓ Consider paring down your content to an absolute bare minimum. That will buy you lots of extra white space and that rejection of scarcity implies luxury and a lack of compromise. Sometimes high information density is appropriate though. You need to know what you're aiming for here before you can produce a consistent and committed design.

Friend or Foe?

? Does your site have a personable feel?

! It's not always appropriate to be the user's friend and trying to come across as a new user's best buddy is likely to backfire in a huge cloud of distaste, but when appropriate a friendly and informal approach can work wonders.

D10

✓ Does your About page contain photos of your staff and personal stories or bios? Do we get to know the back story behind your products or services?

Be Kind to the Environment

? Can your content be easily and economically printed?

! Pages with white text on a black background are going to use up huge amounts of ink when printed. Do you know how your content is distributed across pages when printed? Do you end up printing lots of pages with hardly anything on? Do all your images print - including your adverts?

D11

✓ Your key weapon here is CSS media queries. Set up queries to reduce ink required for backgrounds, remove most of your images and layout your pages sensibly.

Keep Text Together

? Are you showing widows and orphans to your users?

! The definitions of widows and orphans are a bit loose and in some ways are specific to print media. Essentially though they're short sections of text which have become visually separated from text they're associated with. For example, when flowing text around an image, it's possible for the last line to drop beneath the image and appear completely isolated from the rest of its paragraph.

D12

✓ It's very difficult to reliably remove widows and orphans from web sites because they need to be responsive and fluid these days. Test your text layout in common viewports and balance layout to minimise their appearance.

Size Your Text

?   Are you displaying text at the right size?

!   Choosing the right text size is surprisingly complex. Users may have visual impairments, they may zoom the whole site, they may resize just the text, they may shrink the screen, view in portrait, view on a phone. All these things and many more, only some of which you have control over will affect your decisions on font sizing.

D13

✓   If in doubt, stick with the default size of 16px that your browser renders. You'll want larger headlines though. And you'll want smaller text for citations and the like. Is your body font legible, particularly at small sizes. Turn off anti-aliasing when text begins to 'fuzz-out' at small point sizes. Balance text size with your layout to give a reasonable measure.

Set Your Measure

? Have you checked for a reasonable measure?

! The measure of a piece of text is the number of characters per line. It's important to get this right as being either significantly under or over the ideal can seriously impact readability.

D14

✓ Aim for about 75 characters per line. You can adjust your measure in a number of ways: adjust the overall layout, number/width of columns, font-size, tracking and kerning are the main ones. On top of this you can live with off centre measure values by tweaking line-height to increase or decrease the visual step from one line to the next.

Limit Typefaces

? Have you got more than two typefaces on your site?

! The quick and dirty way to increase contrast on a site is to employ multiple typefaces. While that works it destroys consistency at the same time. Note that contrast and consistency can be varied independently.

D15

✓ Limit the number of typefaces to a display font and a body font. Unless you want to break the rules. Which is also fine. Sometimes. You can gain plenty of contrast by using colour, font sizes, weights, kerning etc.

To Serif Or Not To Serif

? Are you using a serif font for your body copy?

! Print media displays at a much higher resolution (hundreds of dpi) than online media (often only 72 ppi). That allows print to take advantage of the visual cues afforded by serifs. Consequently, you'll see most print body copy set using a serifed font. Online body copy just doesn't have the resolution to support those kinds of fine details though and they often detract from legibility at small sizes.

D16

✓ Marginally prefer a sans-serif for body copy, particularly large runs of text which become tiring with serifs. Unless you're using a large font-size, in which case serifs start to be beneficial. Serifs are obviously fine in large headlines and display text.

Fine Typography

? Are you using proper typographic characters and features?

! Modern browsers are beginning to support more and more typographic functionality. Investigate what you can make use of in the context of your browser market.

D17

✓ Look for ligature support in your fonts. You may also want to enable the use of swashes and other decorative font features. Always use proper typographic characters and glyphs. For example quotation marks, en and em dashes, ellipses. Note that your CMS may provide conversion to these glyphs for you.

Light on Dark

? Have you compensated for a light on dark scheme?

! Light text on a dark background tends to look thinner than the converse.

D18

✓ Compensate for this by using a slightly heavier font-weight if available. Nothing so strong as normal to bold but if you have numbered weights available in your font files maybe bump them up one or two slots.

Avoid Rivers

? Do you have vertical bands of white space in your text?

! Rivers in text occur when gaps between words begin to align vertically. When word gaps are small the eye doesn't notice these but if you're cranking up the gap size then statistics and the human mind will conspire to produce clear perception of rivers.

D19

✔ Normally this isn't an issue but avoid large word spacing. Particularly avoid justified text as this introduces lots of large gaps. Set your text justified left and ragged right. Not what you'll see in print media but we don't have fine control on the web like print typesetters do.

Exercise Taste in Colour Choice.

? Have you analysed the colours in use on your site?

! Entire books have been written on colour theory but the long and short of it is that you need to consider your colour choices carefully.

D20

✓ Start with a baseline two colour scheme; one for text and one for the background. Black on white is conventional but feel free to flip it or use tints or shades. very dark grey on very pale grey is less harsh than black on white. Have a good reason for using strong colours here. Layer stronger colours on top for highlight and focus. Try monochromatic, analogous, complementary or triadic schemes but always have a plan in place. There are plenty of tools about to help here.

Inline Links

? Do you links flow with the text or are they jarring?

! Readers should be able to skip over your links without being stopped in their tracks.

D21

✓ Try to keep your textual links part of the copy flow. For example, replace 'If you want to see more, <u>click here</u> to download a sample' with 'If you want to see more, <u>download a sample</u>'.

Cross Device

? Have you tested your site on multiple devices?

! Many people use mobile devices today and the proportion of visits to sites coming from conventional desktop machines has declined steadily over the last few years. Don't leave such a large section of your market unattended.

✓ Make sure your site is responsive by employing techniques such as CSS media queries and smart, fluid grid layouts. Consider providing higher resolution imagery for Retina devices.

D22

Cross Browser

? Which browsers do you support?

! All browsers work slightly differently so it's not sensible to expect your site to look pixel perfect on all of them. It's not even sensible to expect it to function perfectly on really old browsers. It is reasonable to expect all users to have a decent experience on whatever browser they're using though. They should be able to see all your content even if they don't get to see all the fancy bells and whistles that a modern web site can offer.

✓ Develop your site from the ground up to provide a basic experience with very little requirements on the browser. Layer interactive functionality on top of it but always maintain a usable fall-back. Test your site on multiple browsers.

D23

Favicon

? Have you provided a favicon for your users?

! This is the little icon that sits on the tab in your browser. It's helpful to users with multiple tabs open in that they can easily identify which tab is your site. Apple devices can also display larger icons on the home screen as well.

D24

✓ Create a 16x16 favicon for all users. In addition consider providing larger icons for Apple users.

Too Clever?

? Are you being clever or funny?

! Not everyone will get your clever allusions or appreciate your brand of humour. Feel free to do both, but recognise the fineness of the line you're walking and that you will decrease your audience size but increase their passion for your brand. Both approaches are valid and arguably, going for a niche makes better sense. Just be aware of the downsides.

D25

✓ Check all your content for tone in relation to humour, in-jokes, jargon etc. Increase the emphasis on these things if you're looking to focus in on a niche market. Decrease them for mass appeal.

Copyright Notice

? Does your copyright notice auto-update each year?

! If you have a copyright notice at the bottom of your pages, it probably includes the current year. But does it include this current year, or just the latest current year in which you remembered to check it? This is a minor issue but it serves to illustrate a more fundamental point about maintainable web sites. If stuff needs updating, make sure will get updated.

✓ The best way to ensure content remains up to date is to automate it. In the case of the copyright notice, you can either use PHP on the server end or you can use JavaScript on the client end. Both of them allow you to pull the current year out of a call to a date function and display that as text on the page. Prefer using the PHP version as it's not reliant on the user having their clock set right.

M1

Content vs Presentation

? Have you separated your content or structure from the way it is styled or presented?

! HTML is there to let you express what you want to say. CSS is there to lay it out and present it nicely.

✓ Go through your HTML looking for any hint of styling. Look for inline CSS as well as <b> tags and the like. If you've got <table> tags in there, are they presenting tabular data or are they being used to layout your site. If your site is old you'll likely have lots of these that need removing. Look out for too many <div> tags on more modern sites. There's less need for these now with modern frameworks taking up the bulk of the leg work for layout. Remove it all and drop it in CSS file instead. The final test should be to turn off CSS altogether. Does your site still work? It'll look horrid but is it usable? Is there any hint of styling left? There shouldn't be.

M2

Centralize CSS and Scripts

? Have you got any inline CSS or scripting in your HTML files?

! When you're looking to fix a scripting problem you need to be looking in one place. Ditto, when you've got a styling issue. More importantly, if you've got inline styling being applied to an HTML page, the likelihood is you'll also have the same stuff being applied to another page. If you change it in one place, that change won't be applied to the other. Not good.

✓ Pull out all styling and scripting from HTML files into external CSS and JS files. Centralising them greatly reduces maintenance and reduces the chance for inconsistencies.

M3

Tidy Files

? Are your files and folders tidy?

! Spending time hunting for files in a sea of data can really kill your productivity. It breaks your flow and acts as a high frequency interrupt to the real task at hand; creating.

✓ There are plenty of ways to organise a folder structure and exactly how you do it may well vary from project to project, at least in some minor ways. In some respects this is part of a larger workflow issue; keeping a rhythm to your development process. A general folder structure will have a place for work files (article copy, PSDs and AIs etc.), admin stuff like invoices, as well as a copy of the actual file structure that will be deployed to your staging or production server. If you're the client this is the only bit you'll likely get to see. There should be folders for CSS, JavaScript, images and possibly more. Make sure the files in here are sensibly named and make sure there aren't several different versions of each file; that's what version control is for.

M4

Be Portable

? If you needed to move your site to a different host, how difficult would that be?

! Unless you have a really complex site and a seriously customised hosting setup, there's no reason why moving to a new host should be a trauma. Ditto for moving to a new location on the same host or a new domain.

✓ Use relative paths where possible. Make sure you have a script written that can do a search and replace in your database and source files for your domain. That'll cover most eventualities.

M5

Validation

? Does your site pass W3C Validation?

! Nobody would suggest that passing W3C is sufficient proof of a working site but it's certainly necessary as part of that proof. There's no need to pass every test as a lot of the warnings can be considered innocuous but any serious violations should be fixed.

✓ Run your site through the W3C validator and fix errors and any serious warnings. Some experience is necessary here. Make sure you're using the right DOCTYPE before you test your site though.

M6

Stock Images

? Are you using stock images legally?

! If you're using stock images on your site, have you got the right to do so? Often the use of such images comes with the requirement to pay a royalty but not always.

✓ Check each image on your site. Is it something you or your designer have created? If not, ensure you're familiar with the terms of any associated licence and make sure any royalty has been paid.

P1

Fonts

? Have you licenced the fonts on your site?

! Most people assume that fonts are free. After all, they've got plenty installed on their computers already and there's no problem using those. But those fonts have incurred a licence fee. It's just bundled into the cost of the software on the machine. Many fonts used on web sites are also subject to licence fees.

✓ Check your CSS file and look for font declarations. Sometimes a readme or licence file will be bundled with the font but sometimes you'll need to check on the font foundry's web site to see if you need to pay a fee. Your designer will normally have taken care of this for you but the responsibility for making sure is yours.

P2

User Data

? Are you compliant with laws on data protection?

! Any time you're storing data about your users you need to exercise a little care. Depending on the amount and kind of data your storing you may need to exercise an awful lot of care.

✓ If you're storing user data, even if it's just cookies, you need to let them know what you're storing. You should probably have a privacy policy available too. Check with a lawyer if you've got significant data storage issues.

P3

Limit Access

? Is your site secure?

! Security is a huge topic but there are a few basics that every web site owner should consider.

✓ Use .htaccess settings to limit access to sensitive folders. Use robots.txt to prevent search engines indexing parts of your site.

P4

Backups

? Do you have an automated and tested backup scheme in place?

! Your data is priceless and it's security is often overlooked. It's not exactly glamorous but it is essential. What would happen if your web site just vanished overnight? What if your user data disappeared?

✓ Make sure you have a data backup routine in place. Although your host will be doing backups, getting data restored can be time consuming. It's also usually time critical. What would happen if your hosting company folded one day? You need to make sure you have your own routine in place. And it needs to be tested regularly. Make sure you can actually restore from the backups. It's no use just having a backup file if it can't be used to recreate your data. If your backup routine is automated (and it really, really should be), how will you know if it begins to fail?

P5