Make your website work harder with incremental development

Putting forward the business case for incremental website development

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Incremental development

A step-by-step approach to a better user experience and lower development costs

"Hey, isn't it about time we redid our website?"

If there's one question a B2B marketer shouldn't be hearing in 2010, it's this one.

Not because the website is no longer central to your company. Quite the opposite. But because it's not time to just redo the website - it's time to rethink the entire approach to website development.

The world's more progressive companies are embracing the concept of incremental development. Simply put, it is the idea that to overhaul the company website once every three years - at enormous expense and over an unwieldy timescale - is an extremely ineffective way to manage your company's web strategy. Incremental development represents a new perspective on digital marketing, and enables you to deliver a more effective web presence, increasing customer satisfaction, whilst also bringing you greater value for money.

Why incremental development?

There are three pressing reasons for this change in approach, and incremental development represents a proven, affordable and strategic solution. The aim of this document is to explain the need for incremental development, and to summarise what it entails. We hope you can turn this information to your advantage - by both reducing your website development costs and making your website work harder for your business.

> ***"It's not just time to 'redo' your website - it's time to rethink the whole approach."***

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1. The web has taken centre stage

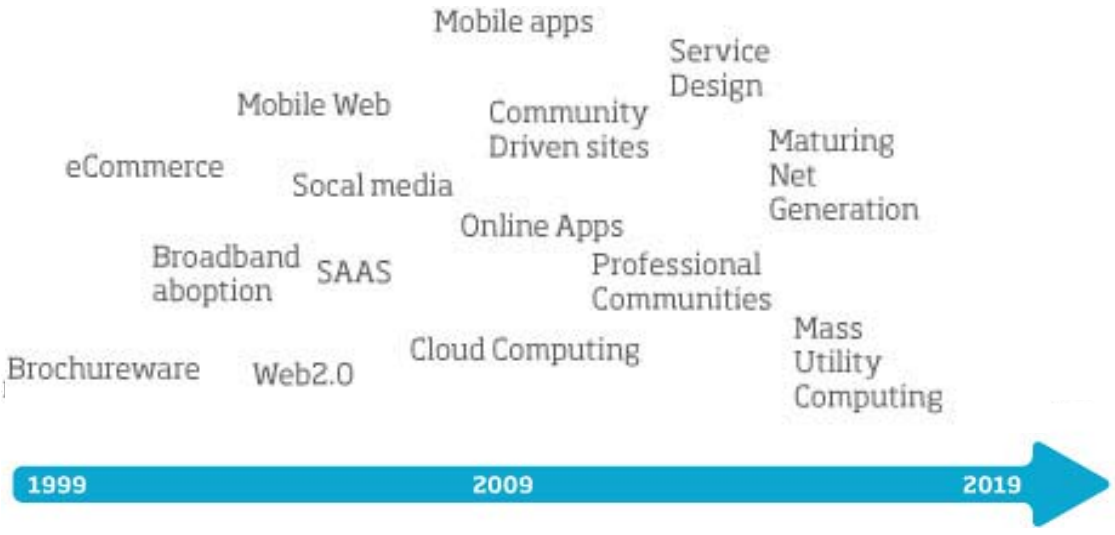
Your website has never been more important. When the web first appeared, websites were limited to 'brochureware', an online shop window that allowed prospects to view products, brands and companies before moving onto the next stage of the buying process.

But in the last decade much has changed. With the arrival - and more importantly, the increasing maturity and widespread adoption - of technologies such as mobile computing, social media and e-commerce the website has become central to the success of every brand.

Digital will dominate B2B, not just in marketing, but also in the way we do business altogether: used to manage relationships, to buy services, to self-service accounts, to communicate with peers, to participate in networks. Offline contacts and transactions will all be facilitated via a digital medium.

The business buyer of 2010 is more than just digitally aware. They are fast becoming unconscious users of digital technology; they expect answers, they expect results, they expect information. And the website is the cornerstone of the online infrastructure that satisfies their needs.

The Evolution of B2B Digital



"The website is the cornerstone of the online infrastructure that satisfies customer needs."

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2. The edge of experience

But not only is the website moving into centre stage, the user is also demanding a better experience - a concept largely neglected until now by many marketers. Too often, the inside-out philosophy has prevailed: we provide the information - it's up to the user to find it.

For the modern web user, it is no longer enough to just have a question answered and a need fulfilled. It is the way in which we serve website visitors that matters most now. As the web continues to explode in size, customers and prospects can find answers in many places. The reason to choose your website as a destination relies increasingly on the experience they have once they are there. The quality of the user experience is fast becoming one of the most important competitve advantages a brand could wish to have.

3. Cost pressures

In the current economic climate, businesses face budget cuts and the pressure is on to eke out better results from scarce resources in a tougher market. It's not easy out there. Moreover, justifying an investment in a large new website project is far more challenging, and in a lot of cases simply not feasible.

Yet we know that digital marketing is measurable and businesses risk being left behind as competitors steal a march on them with their embracement of web 2.0 technologies and the social web. If anything, the necessity to invest now is greater than ever, and businesses who will come out of the downturn the strongest will be those that are regrouping and investing right now.

So there's a dichotomy here. Ideal time to invest, but no (or limited) money. What can be done about it?

The current downturn can work to business' advantage if you change the approach for development and approach your activity one step at a time. For once, you can yield to budgetary pressures and actually improve the way you do things - with an improved end result.

In short, incremental development involves breaking the job of website redevelopment down page by page, feature by feature, issue by issue. A planned and continual series of relatively small iterative improvements, learning and refining as you go along, can produce superior results.

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Five guidelines for incremental development

Before explaining the key characteristics of incremental development, it is worth taking a moment to look at the alternative.

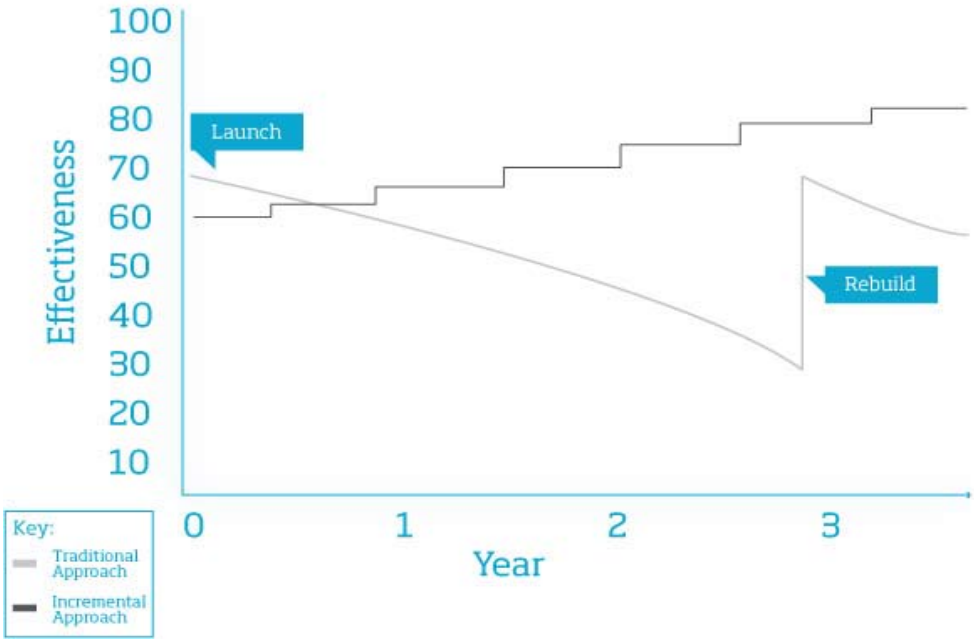
A business' typical web rebuild project used to go like this: spend a lot of money, a lot of effort, more time than you thought and a load of blood, sweat and tears to - eventually - get your brand spanking big new website launched. Breathe a sigh of relief. It's live now, we can relax and hand everything over to the junior exec who will post up a news item every 6 months (but other than that let's let it sit there and do nothing until 3 years' time when we go through the whole exercise again).

In the meantime your IT team will probably moan about the code they don't understand and aren't qualified to manage, and the SEO people tell you that you need to spend another load of money changing the pages and rewriting the content so that you index better.

It needn't be so. Agile, iterative or incremental development (it has a few names, but the idea is basically the same) is a much better approach to building and managing not only your website but your entire digital presence (for the two cannot be separated these days).

Instead of an ulcer-inducing three-month project followed by a three-year period of inactivity and gradual atrophy, websites are subject to constant review and improvement. An easier, more manageable and ultimately more effective approach to website development.

Incremental v wholesale redevelopment: an effectiveness comparison over time



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1. Start small

It's fine to have a master plan, but focus on the core thing you need to say or do, be as streamlined as possible, so you can get things done fast.

37 signals, the company behind the very successful Basecamp collaboration software, says 'It's better to release half an application than a half-arsed application'. What they mean by this is that it's best to start small and realistic rather than create a bloated monster, ridden with functionality or content that no one uses or understands, or that doesn't work well.

> ***"It's better to release half an application than a half-arsed application."***

2. Focus

Have a vision or roadmap but focus on one thing at a time. This is difficult where the imperative is often to hit everything at once, and everything seems interdependent. It isn't. You have to make a few tough choices about what to prioritise, but your users should help you decide that anyway.

3. Release early, release often

Get your streamlined site launched as early as possible, learn what works, what doesn't work, and then make sure you build on this and update often. This is why it's known as incremental or iterative development.

Every time you update you can measure the effect, and you can experiment. Marketers more used to the trial and error - and therefore constant refinement - techniques used in direct marketing or online advertising will know how quickly this can raise quality.

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4. Involve your users

This is critical, and really the whole point of this approach that makes it successful.

Engage with users on what they want. Survey them, test with them, ask them to rate your content, communicate new content updates to them and canvas opinion (which you can now do as you are updating often) and - above all - listen.

Usability testing has become a central part of the development process. Whether it is basic as canvassing the opinions of site visitors by online surveys, or whether you are using the increasingly sophisticated range of usability 'labs', it is essential to find out what your users think. You can sit around and discuss your site, but without feedback you will only ever be working on assumptions. Remember: you are not the user.

User testing tools can include the following:

Evaluation testing: a heuristic analysis of the overall user journey

First impression testing: usually measured by eye-tracking, this is often a more sub-conscious measurement of the user experience. Tests immediate appeal and apparent usability of site.

Optimised conversions & calls to action: Specific focus on key funnels to improve conversions. Analysis of exit points and barrier reduction. Typically measured by AB variant testing (comparing two prototype page layouts).

Content optimisation: Multi-variant testing of different content types and examples to assess comprehension and appropriateness. Can also compare usability of text versus images/diagrams.

Navigational analysis: Focus on navigation, taxonomy and labelling in order to accelerate and streamline the user journey.

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5. Measure

Don't be afraid to drop or change things that don't work.

Charles Darwin said: "It's not the strongest species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change". This agile approach accommodates changing market conditions and changing user needs, allowing your site to grow and evolve quickly, but most of all it will refine the effectiveness.

Areas of focus

Incremental development is not a blunt tool. It is a process that allows you to focus on the online activities that are important to you, and in refining your own unique web strategy. For example, the technique of constant refinement can be used to improve the way your site achieves the following:

- Lead generation
- E-commerce sales
- Community building
- User engagement
- Service improvement
- Content management & development
- Customer retention
- Campaign integration

In summary...

Incremental development is not the only way, and it is certainly not just for new site development. Many companies might do well to resist the temptation to refresh their site because they are simply bored of it (don't forget - your customers may just have got comfortable with it!) and to undertake an assessment of the small steps they can take to address the main pain points instead of going back to the drawing board.

The fact that incremental development is often more cost-effective than wholesale site redesigns will not be lost on your finance director either, particularly in these straitened times. But downturn or no downturn, you may well find that a gradual approach gives you not just better awareness of your site's effectiveness, but also more control over its development.

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