

"Add to Favorites?" Making Your Web Site Bookmark-able

by **Emily Cotler**

What keeps readers returning to your Web site? It's not the bells and whistles or that flashy headshot. It's all about the content. Web expert Emily Cotler spells out how to get to know your readers, and then how to give them what they want to keep them logging on to your site.



You've decided you need a Web site. Great. Maybe you already have one and you've decided you need to overhaul it, update it, make it better. Good thinking. So how much planning have you done? Have you aligned your goals with your capabilities? Have you even decided what kind of site you want? Do you want your Web site to be a working site, designed to be a forum that generates a desired, planned outcome? Do you want your Web site to be a place where site users become "regulars" who bookmark your home page? If so, you must adopt the concept of the Web site as a living document. "Living" in that it needs to be fed regularly, and with yummy stuff.

WWW.Content

But why do this? What's the point? The answer here is straightforward and universal: understand and appeal to your target audience. For any industry, whether romance novels or home shopping for anything from pet supplies to mortgages, Web development must focus on the target audience at every level: design, download, and of course, content — regular, compelling content.

The number one reason people return to Web sites is neither design nor interface. Repeat site usage has far less to do with color, animation, or graphics than it has to do with compelling content. But while the substantive word here is "content," the operative word is definitely "compelling." Without compelling content your site is merely an on-line brochure, not a true working Web site.

Hey! You! I Know You!

What do you know about your audience? What do you know about their preferences, pet peeves, on-line habits, and download capabilities? These are all questions that should be answered right at the start of your Web-site project, regardless of whether you are launching for the first time or redesigning. In *Web Redesign: Workflow that Works* (New Riders, 2001), the book I co-wrote with Kelly Goto (a

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top-notch Web development creative director), we spend a good chunk of our word count discussing the importance of understanding your audience and planning everything around that data.

Brochure Sites = Boring Sites

Understanding who your audience is and what they want, along with knowing very clearly what you want from your audience — these are critical factors in defining the goals of your Web site. And you should definitely have goals, especially if you want a working Web site over a brochure site. Please note that there is nothing wrong with brochure sites — they are great places on the Internet where people can surf and sample your goods. But why should they come back? Unless you are Nora Roberts, you probably don't have a new book (or three) coming out every month, and therefore, don't have new excerpts several times a year. If you are like the rest of this industry, your one, maybe two, excerpts per year won't be enough fuel to keep your site working. Having goals bridges the marketing challenge — getting people to come to your site is a marketing challenge. But getting people to come back, that's a planning challenge. Getting people to become regular site users requires having clear goals in the planning stage.

Goals (Skipping the "Motivation and Conflict" Just This Once)

Goals. What do you want your site to do? Or more specifically, what do you want the visitors to your site to do? Do you want to amass a mailing list? Do you want to lead site users to an order link? Are you trying to endear readers to you and create a fan-base? Moving forward without knowing what your goals are is moving forward blind.

Keep in mind that without a clear understanding of your audience, you are essentially developing your site for yourself and it's therefore a vanity piece, not a marketing piece. This is okay, so long as you are aware of what you are doing and don't

expect your site to work as a marketing piece.

First Things First

When developing a Web site that works, you should adopt a workflow that works for your entire development, both pre- and post-launch. There is definitely an order to the work involved in designing (or redesigning) your Web site. For instance, while developing your content plan should come *before* visual design, it should definitely come after understanding your audience and defining other parameters of your project such as schedule and budget. There are distinct reasons for this workflow, and we explain why in the book. But this article is more focused. Here we are talking specifically about planning for keeping your site alive with regular compelling, content. And that brings us right back to — you guessed it — audience.

And My Second Granddaughter's Report Card Was . . .

I can unequivocally tell you this much about your audience: romance readers are famously author-loyal. They want to connect with you. Make the connection an ongoing thing, and you have put a nice notch in your marketing belt.

Does all this mean that in the name of marketing you have to lay out your whole life on the Internet? Does content development need to become your top priority? No, absolutely not. Compelling content need not be highly personal or private information. Your fans do not need to know your children's names or your past indiscretions (unless you want them to know such information). Nor does compelling content need to be long or time-consuming to prepare — anywhere from 50 to a few hundred words is more than adequate (remember, your audience is Web surfing, not sitting on a comfy couch with your gripping novel). Compelling content just needs to be interesting, from you, and it needs to be regularly updated — anywhere from every few weeks to every few months.

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Be Fascinating in 100 Words or Less

Offer reviews of what you're reading; put up a new "Frequently Asked Questions" a few times a year. Post an interesting tidbit about how you came up with the storyline for your book. Include a photo. Announce a foreign edition of your book. Recommend a great camping/shopping/skiing spot. Make yourself open to being connected with readers who want to become your fans. Spread these updates out so they work to your advantage.

Two romance-author sites that I have designed and now manage have updates every two to four weeks. These range from very short bits of content — adding a new book signing or news about a book's performance on various lists — to posting a short quarterly newsletter, or another FAQ, to adding a whole new book page. And every once in a while, interspersed with the book information, each of these authors pass on a small tidbit about themselves that they feel comfortable sharing with their audience. These go a certain distance towards endearing the audience.

For instance, author Jane Porter recently posted a great photo from her trip to London with a short "Note from Jane," and author Susan Andersen put up a few fun snapshots of the new triplets in her family.

More to a Contest than Winning

Now, don't go hogwild on this. Similar to your diligence in not fluffing out your manuscript with non-essential sentences or scenes, have a reason behind every piece of Web content. For instance, contests. Many authors have a contest. But if your contest is neither leading folks to read the excerpt of your current release (which is posted in hopes of hooking them into a sale), nor encouraging them join your mailing list (so you can announce new releases), then why do you have it? Perhaps your site is brand new and you are trying to build a viewership. Okay, this is a good reason for a contest, but after a year you should really be

thinking about offering something else on your site as well. After all, how many times can the same person enter your contest and win a signed cover flat or a copy of your backlist?

Does Anyone Besides Me Care?

Ask yourself a few questions as you consider content: Am I offering my audience way more than they want to know? Am I not giving them enough? Why am I including this particular piece of information? Does anyone besides me care? Am I bugging my audience?

Hint: music that automatically loads on sites bugs 99.9% of site users. Offer the option to listen to music, but don't force it on them. Ask other people. Test your content. Ask 15 people: "Of these three items, which are you least likely to be interested in?" If it is evenly split, then all the content is viable. If 80% of folks say they aren't so interested in your gardening tips, then that is telling you something. Get user feedback and pay attention to it. What you think of your site is only what you think of your site. What users think of your site is indicative of your site's success.

Plan to Maintain

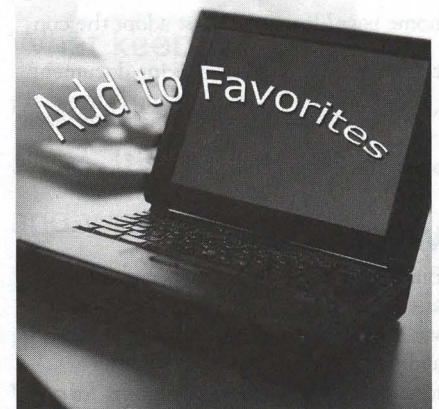
Obviously, regular content is, by definition, post-launch (or relaunch if you already have a site but are redesigning). But in order to update your site with compelling content you must consider maintenance when developing your site's content in the first place. First, understand your audience, and then consider how much time you can put into maintenance. Keep in mind that with careful planning you can prep months' worth of content at a time. Then it is simply a matter of plugging that content in, or sending it off to your designer.

With these understandings aligned with your site goals, what features will allow you to update your site with well-considered, compelling content that the audience will care about? Suddenly, a recipe each month may seem excessive, but one in each of your newsletters might feel

right. After all, your newsletters probably only come out before each book release, with special "issues" to commemorate special milestones in your career like a RITA nomination or one of your books appearing as a made-for-TV movie.

Update, Update, Update

Whatever content you decide upon, think it through, and organize it well. How to organize? That's the topic for another article (or a workshop at the Conference). But here is a tip: make sure there is a spot on your home page for site update info. Go to any site that I have designed — every single author site has this feature. There is no better way to alert site users that you've



posted something new, and that there is a reason to revisit your site.

Good luck, and may all your user feedback be good.



Emily Cotler is the creative director at waxcreative design (www.waxcreative.com). Her Web design credits include <juliaquinn.com>, <janeporter.com>, <susanandersen.com>, <susankaylaw.com>, <cjcarmichael.com>, <nicoleburnham.com>, <candicehern.com>, with several more author sites in production. Emily is a co-author of *Web Redesign: Workflow that Works* (New Riders, 2001), already being touted as a "must have" within the Web design industry.