Websites are Shop Windows Not Vanity Projects

It’s that time of year when many photographers take stock of the images they have created over the preceding twelve months and how they have or have not reflected this work in refreshing and updating their websites. So, it seems to be appropriate an appropriate time to not only reconsider what you have on your websites but also how it works and if it is work for you and your potential audience.

I first found myself in a discussion concerning website design back in the heady days of the dotcom boom seventeen years ago. At that time, the phrase I heard most often in relation to building websites and the essential factor to take into consideration when doing so was ‘Digital Architecture’ referring to the construction and structural planning for how a website could be built and should work. Just as a house should work as a place to live and a place to use so the feeling was that a website should work not only for the builder but also for the user. The aim was to get the user to where they wanted to get to with as few clicks as possible. It’s a practice and logic that remains with me today whatever website I visit, and you may feel the same about what constitutes a successful website and therefore what constitutes positive user experience. But do you see your own website through the same eyes?

Let’s be clear about what your website is, in essence it’s your shop window and every time a visitor clicks on a tab within your menu they are visiting different departments of your store. Using this retail metaphor may seem blatantly commercial to some of you reading this, if you feel that this is the case then may I suggest that you replace the shop with that of a gallery or bookshop. Whichever you choose to use the metaphor remains the same, you want to be led through a series of physical or digital spaces finding what you want to see as easily as possible. Minimal clicks help this progress but so does accurate and appropriate signage that can be universally understood.

It is in the creation of this signage that so many photographers drift into using language that may make complete sense to themselves and their work but that has no relevance to those visiting the site with no prior knowledge of the photographer or their practice. It is the photographer’s responsibility to lead the website visitor through their work and site just as they would a portfolio, exhibition or book because in essence a website is all of these existing in one location within the digital space.

It is for this reason that I teach and promote the adoption of what I refer to as ‘best practice’ when it comes to building a website. What this means in reality is by starting out with a clear understanding of what you want your website to do for you and ensure that your expectations are realistic and that the build you decide to create is appropriate to those expectations. Next, create a menu that is simple and direct in its language. This needs to consist of no more than Portfolio, Projects, About and Contact, although you might also include Moving Image if you need to. The Portfolio section should contain a tightly edited selection only of your strongest images, the Projects section speaks for itself, the About section should be grammatically correct and well written and can contain details of books published, exhibitions and awards, whilst the ‘Contact’ section should include your mobile phone number, an email address that uses the URL of your site and your social media account details. That’s it! Nothing more is needed, a short series of simple to understand signs to lead the visitor to your site directly to the area you want them to visit and that they want to see.

This menu also acts as a trafficking device as the first step for anyone new to the site will be the Portfolio section, if they like the images they will most likely progress to the Projects to further explore the work, from here the obvious destination is to About and then hopefully on to the Contact section. Is your website as easy as that to navigate? If so I apologise for stating the obvious, if not then it’s your call as to whether or not what I am saying makes sense.

One further aspect of best practice to consider is the captioning of images. Each image within the Portfolio section needs to have a caption that explains who, where and when and if it’s a commissioned image the client also needs to be included in the caption. I know of so many photo editors and art directors who constantly bemoan the lack of captions on websites to help them understand the context in which an image has been created. So why not include them? I have yet to hear a logical answer to this question.

A website should not be created to only please the photographer, it should not be a vanity project but a showcase of the photographer and their work created to provide a positive visitor experience. Just as you would expect any other website you visit to be.

The old adage that you have one image or one minute to catch a visitor’s attention and get them to engage with your site remains true according to the many commissioners I speak with but that one minute may be becoming even shorter as attention spans shorten. Perhaps we are at a stage when the one image is the only defining factor. This shortening of attention leads me to discuss Instagram as a photographic showcase and its impact on website design.

For many years the solo image home page was the common choice for photographers but over the past few years the tiled home page that echoes the look of an Instagram page has become more and more popular. The jury is out as to its popularity amongst commissioners as many I have spoken with like the look of these sites but are unconvinced by the inconsistent functionality that many demonstrate. The idea of gauging a photographer’s body of work with one look takes away the sense of jeopardy involved in staking a decision on one image but it can also lead to a sense of falling down a photographic rabbit hole once an image has been clicked on. User experience is paramount when making decisions as to how a website is structured so if adopting this format, it really pays to see how easily your friends can find their way around your site without becoming frustrated and annoyed. Never forget that the chances of being commissioned by a photographer are extremely low but the chances of being commissioned by someone who has little knowledge of photography are high so asking experts for their opinion on your site has little value in the harsh reality of website usage.

Speaking with a highly respected art director recently they questioned the need for a photographer to have a website when Instagram in their view was a far more effective and platform for her to see new work and commission from. It’s an interesting viewpoint but what she went on to say was perhaps even more relevant a consideration point. When faced with the tsunami of images that Instagram undoubtedly is she stressed the importance for photographers to write extended captions to their images and to use their Instagram accounts as narrative tools. She went on to cite the work of two photographers Derek Hudson (@hudsonpix) and Harry Borden (@HarryBorden) as excellent examples of this utilization of the platform. This manipulation of the Instagram platform as a form of narrative tool I believe frees the website from this duty and allows it to become more of a portal to other platforms directing the visitor to the site to other online platforms where they can experience the images created in different ways and context.

Returning to the retail metaphor I used previously in this article this would be equivalent to visiting a store and then being made aware of how you can engage with the brand across other platforms. In this sense, I think that a strong argument can be made for a photographer to retain their website but to re-evaluate the role it has in their overall practice and marketing strategy. The use of the term marketing strategy may rankle with some of you in the same way as my retail metaphor may have done and I admit that I am no fan of the hard sell marketing strategy logic that many feel that they have to adopt to become a ‘successful’ photographer. However, a website is a shop window for your work and by having one you are to some extent at least accepting this definition. How you choose to run your shop is of course your call, but if you are not getting many customers and you want to then you may be doing something wrong. No one ones to visit an unfriendly shop where they can’t find what they want. Maybe it’s time to have a stocktake!