7 KEY STEPS

To Preparing for a College or University Website Redesign

OHO INTERACTIVE

Do you ever feel like your website is a mess?

It's like a cluttered garage that you wish someone else would just clean out–get rid of the trash, sweep it out, and put anything of value back on some nice shiny shelves.

You could turn around, walk away, hire an agency, and tell them – fix it!

But, it's your job to clean it out.

To help you dive in, we've outlined a seven-point action plan – if you follow it, you'll end up with a good understanding of what's in your "garage" and some first thoughts on all of the key areas for a new website.

1 Let's Get Your Feelings Out!

First, start a list of all the things that you hope will be better. Get down all of the little (and big) things that annoy you about your current site. Your list might look like:

- The design feels dated
- It doesn't work on mobile
- Too much text
- It is too hard to update content
- Photos are too small
- No video
- People don't update their content
- The styles are inconsistent
- Our CMS is a major pain

Go ahead … make your list now. Do you feel better?

If your list is similar to the list above, you're not alone. You can consider many of the changes here the baseline for your new site: you want something that looks better, works on mobile, and has an improved CMS. Almost any redesign should address all of these issues. Getting them out on paper will help you move onto some deeper questions.

2 Define Your Business Goals for Your Website

Let's step back from your tactical list above and think about what your website is doing for your "business goals." A business goal should have two parts – a goal and measurement. For example: we want to increase online applications by 5% or we want to increase campus visits by 10%.

Just to clarify – we want to make our site responsive is not a business goal. It's a tactic that levels up to a business goal. For example, "Increase inquiries by 2% by making the website forms responsive" is a tactic supporting a goal.

Typically, business goals fall into one of three broad categories:

- Increase revenue
- Decrease expense
- Increase brand recognition

In higher education, schools increase revenue by attracting more students or increasing donations. Schools can decrease expense by fielding less phone calls to answer basic questions or reducing staff.

Once you write down the business goals and a measurement for each, you can brainstorm ideas to use the website to help achieve your business goals.

Action Item: *Talk with your team or other stakeholders and ask them: What are your business goals? How can a website help achieve these goals? How can we measure impact? We like to look at strategic plans and directives from the board or the president for goals.*

3 Benchmark Your Current Website Before a Redesign

While every school that we work with uses Google Analytics, web teams infrequently use analytics and, when they do, the reports include only basic metrics: page views, sessions, bounce rate. You should view these metrics like your blood pressure, temperature, and weight when you go the doctor. These are important, but don't tell how your site is performing to meet your business goals.

To go deeper, we recommend setting up three to five conversion goals for your current website. A conversion goal tracks if users are taking a desired action on your site. We like to track at what rate prospective students are completing actions such as:

- requesting information
- signing up to visit campus
- applying

To measure these goals, we use conversion goals in Google Analytics to count how many prospects reach the "thank you page" that a user views after completing a form. Conversion goals will allow you to see how your current site is contributing to enrollment goals and give you a better sense of how the current website is helping the "business" of your school.

Action Step: *First, if you don't have it configured already, setup Google Analytics on your current website. It's free. Once you've got Google Analytics running, set up conversion goals for key forms. If you're just getting started, check out this step-by-step plan for setting up conversion goals: www.oho.com/conversion*
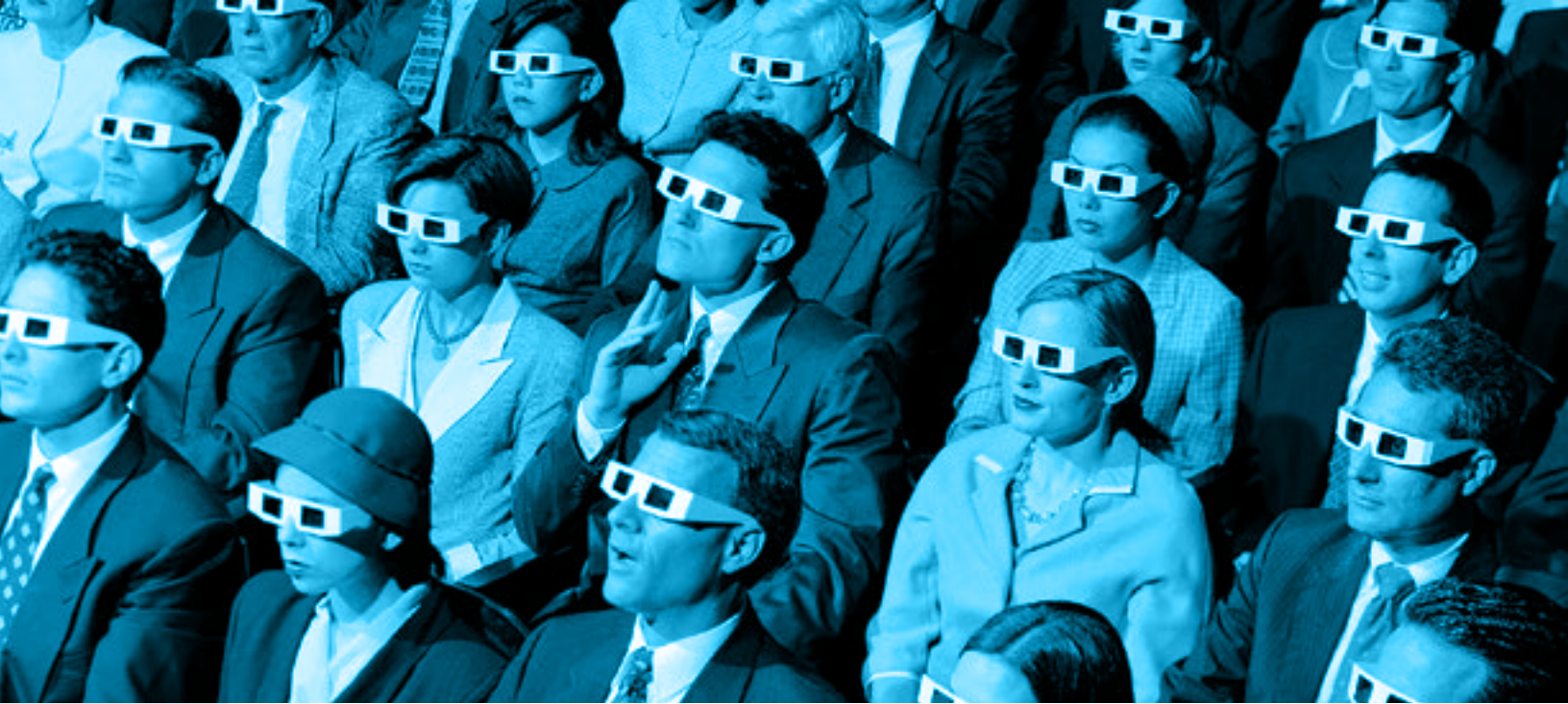
4 Decide on a Primary Audience

Historically, college and university websites have served every audience–prospects, faculty, staff, alumni, news media–equally. These days we find that most schools are focusing website redesigns on prospective students as the primary audience.

While you may agree with this direction, it is important to build consensus within your school that prospective students are the primary audience. If you skip this step, it creates problems during the design process as internal stakeholders will start turf wars for website real estate.

If your school isn't aligned on designing a site for prospective students, here's some research that can be helpful in persuading them:

- Most current students rarely use the main website. When they come to the site they very often link over to other systems such as register for courses, login to the LMS, or finding out daily transactions such as menus or shuttle schedules.

- Alumni do need some content on the main website, but most of the community features are handled by a third-party solution such as iModules or NetCommunity.

- Faculty and staff need access to internal documents. These can be on the public website–but not in the primary user flows–or added to an intranet.

Action Item: *We like to do a quick card sorting activity to prioritize audiences. Gather representatives from across the school: generate a list of the audiences, write each audience on a 3 x 5 card, then have each participant rank these from most important to least important, tally the results.*

5 Who's In Charge of Content? Thinking about Content Governance and Publishing

Every school we've worked with has a huge pain point around website governance and content publishing. You're not likely going to solve this one quickly, but it's helpful to start unpacking this topic.

First, it's catharsis time. Write down an unfiltered list of what's working and not working about your current publishing workflow. Where are there problems? Where are there bottlenecks? How does the lack of governance result in a less-than-professional website?

Second, you're going to do some data collection. Login into your CMS and count how many different people are able to edit content on the website. Then look at how frequently they actually edit content.

Third, explore the options.

- Do you want to centralize your communications? If so, how many team members will you need? Do you need to add staff or change roles?

- Do you want to have a decentralized approach? If so, what can content editors update? What training in the CMS and content writing is required.

- Are you looking for a hybrid approach?

Action Item: *We recommend discussing the above with your web team. Once you have a preliminary idea, document the above and share it with your leadership.*

6 Content Writing

Now that you're all warmed up from the other activities, let's turn to the biggest challenge for any website redesign: content.

Content–editing, writing, migrating–is the effort of every project that is underestimated. And, remember that content also includes photography and video.

A great way to start tackling the content conundrum is to start by counting. You can begin by using Google Analytics, doing a manual count, or using a tool like Screaming Frog, to generate a list of all of your pages.

Dump all of this information into a spreadsheet and cuddle up for an hour to do some quick analysis:

- Tally up the total pages
- Break these pages into big groups–news, events, admissions, alumni, schools, programs–and get a count of the pages in each
- Along the way, count up pages that are obviously out of date and need to get cut

This will get a you a baseline for the content. Then, we'd recommend looking at the quality of your program pages, admissions content, and market-facing student life pages. These are likely the pages that will need to be re-written in a redesign.

Once you get a baseline of how much content there is to write then you can start assessing how many man hours and need to produce pages. A rule of thumb that we use is eight hours per page of content.

Action Step: *Good job doing the above!*

# 7 Integrations With Third-Party Systems

As you're thinking about redesigning your site, you'll need to consider if you want to integrate data sharing between the CMS and third-party digital systems such as your school's CRM–Salesforce, Slate, Banner–student information systems, or marketing automation tools–Hubspot, Marketo, Pardot.

Some background: simple "integrations" can be achieved using an iframe to pull a page from another web system into your website or, in some cases, clients choose just to link over to the other tool.

More complex integrations might be necessary for a data transfer between two different systems such as your CRM. For example, directory data from an HR system can be setup to automatically import into the content management system. The advantage of this type of integration is to reduce the amount of content updates.

There are also content-based-integrations with calendar tools, staff and faculty directories, social media, and faculty profile managers.

Action Item: *Make a list of systems that the web CMS needs to connect with. In most cases, there are likely less than 10 systems. Ask the owners of these systems if there are any plans to change these systems and to explain what sort of connection between the website and the third-party tool needs to happen.*
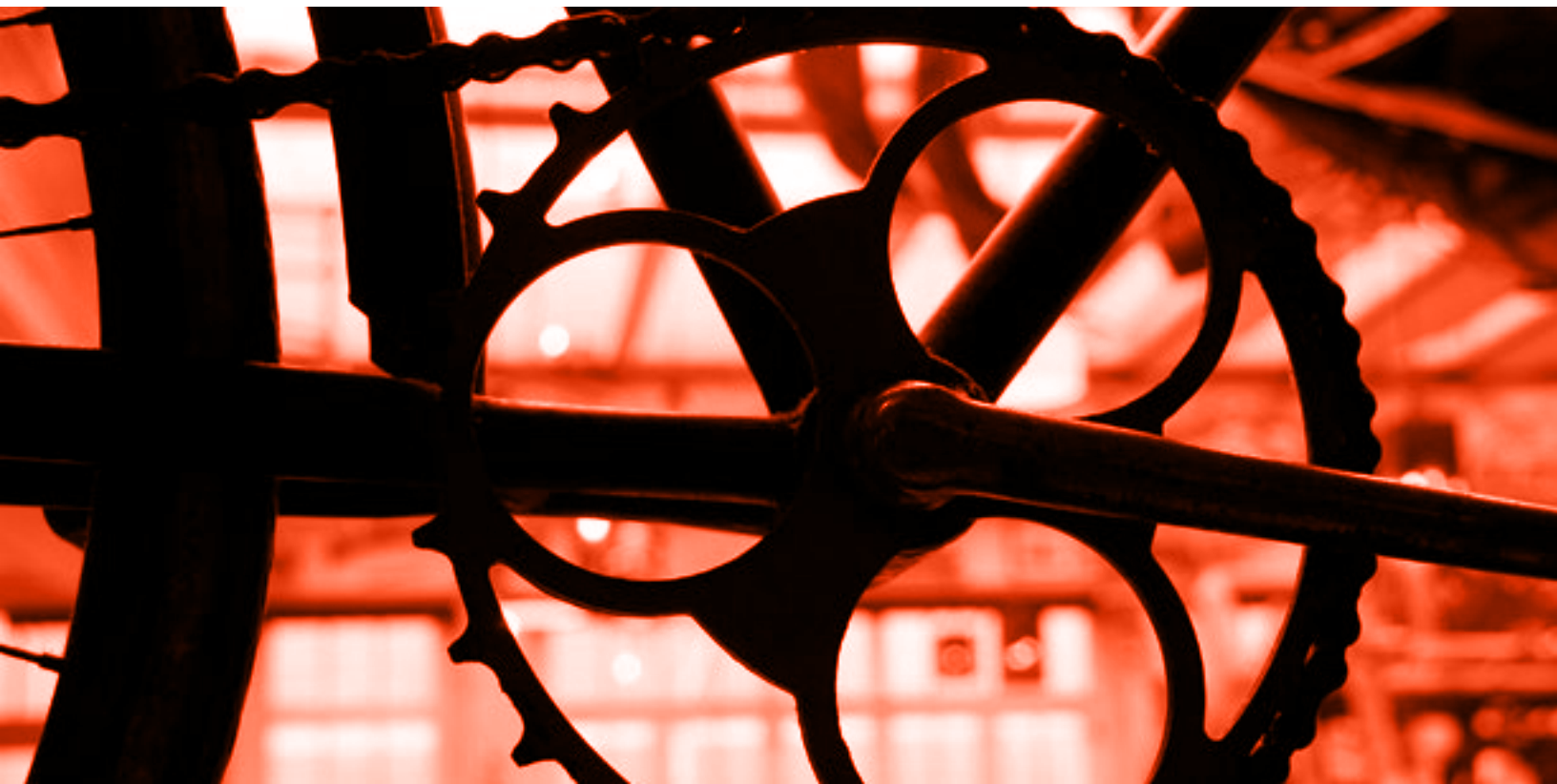
Wrap Up

At this point, if you've taken all the steps below, you should have pulled out most of what's in your "digital" garage onto the driveway where you can get a good look at what you want to save and what you want to drag to the curb. Now, you're ready to start the planning process for a new site and ready to find a partner to help you. Good luck!

1 **Get Your Feelings Out!**

2 **Define Your Business Goals**

3 **Benchmark Your Current Website Before a Redesign**

4 **Decide on a Primary Audience**

5 **Thinking about Content Governance and Publishing**

6 **Content Writing**

7 **Integrations With Third-Party Systems**

THANK YOU

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