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Moving on – not moving off
How to avoid alienating users during a major site revamp

The saying goes you can't please all the people all of the time. Well, wouldn't it be nice to be able to please the majority if you are thinking of giving your website a major wash and brush up?

If you are the webmaster in charge of a very popular and well established site, making substantial changes to your website without alienating your audience can be a stiff challenge.

Make a change in the wrong direction, and suddenly you'll have an angry petition demanding your head and a crowd waving pitchforks outside of Corporate HQ.

Even well-healed websites such as Facebook have learnt painful and public lessons. Only a few months ago, to an unsuspecting world, the popular social networking site made some hefty changes to the look and feel of its site.

In horror, its huge band of users did what they always do in this situation: they launched a petition on Facebook against "the New Facebook"! In short order, 1.7 million Facebook users had signed it, begging the site to be restored to the one they knew and loved.

So strong was the reaction to the site's changes that inevitably the media focused on the negative reaction rather than report a positive story about the site's new design.

You would have thought that Facebook would've learned its lesson. Clearly it hadn't. Around two years ago in late 2007, Facebook attempted to bring in a controversial advertising feature by sneaking it in under the radar.

Aghast at the perceived violation to the spirit of Facebook, some 50,000 users petitioned against the new feature which they felt had been imposed without proper notification from the owners.

I won't bore with the details, but basically the changes didn't require Facebook users to opt-in to them. And it made the fatal assumption that no reaction to the proposed changes (they didn't spot them!) meant they *assumed* users were happy with the course of action. They weren't, of course. They were angry and bitter and up in arms, and in no uncertain terms told Facebook exactly so.
Provoked by this enormous negative reaction, Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg duly groveled, backtracked on the changes and very publicly admitted that he was… "not proud of the way we've handled this situation, and I know we can do better".
Making substantial changes/improvements/upgrades – what you will – to an established website isn't easy. In fact, it's hard and it takes time.

So how do you best go about this?

When considering a major site overhaul, you are probably safe to assume that most people are going to be quite conservative.

Your users are accustomed and happy with your site, and unless they actively say so, they want things broadly to stay as they are. Over time, they have become very comfortable with your site's layout.

Therefore, any changes as far as your loyal user base is concerned are executed at your peril. Let the Facebook example sound like a clarion call inside any webmaster's head.

The best way to introduce a major site upgrade is by giving plenty of advance notice. Introducing a massive change overnight, like the recent one by Facebook, is bound to provoke a nasty reaction. So make sure you don't spring unwelcome surprises.

Before you make major changes, it's wise to get users' collaboration by actively asking for their views and opinions. You'll know from your own experience that active site users (those that use your site at least everyday or more), will have plenty of thoughts about things they wouldn't mind being done differently.

Therefore, ahead of a major site upgrade, allow plenty of consultation time to tap users for their suggestions. Give a formal notice period – I suggest at least two months is long enough for decency and also allows less frequent visitors the chance to air their views.

If you are going for a radical change, a good idea is to launch a beta version. The beta version can be run in parallel to the existing site for as long as you like. In fact, you can continue to run both ad infinitum, but at some point it will be more efficient to quietly close down the old site once the new one has most of the traffic and has become part of users' furniture.

While beta trialing the new site, invite your current users to experiment with it and give plenty of feedback. If the reaction is positive, and you notice an increasing number of users now on the new beta site, you are clearly on the right track. Be sure to keep a running dialogue with your test group. Tell them how you have responded to their suggestions, showcasing positively the best examples. People always respond well to thanks and praise!

You may even want to invite your top users to a face-to-face meeting where they effectively form a well-informed focus group. It won't be difficult getting together around 20 or so users (with food and drink provided). But be structured and work out how best to use their valuable time. The key to the event is a well-thought out evening where you can show them exciting new developments and you listen closely to their informed feedback. This is normally a very creative process which gives you access to thoughts and opinions that go well beyond normal emailed responses. At the evening's end, it's probable that your users have come to a consensus and provided a clear path to changes that can be positively introduced.

So that's beta testing a new site. But as I said above, don't be too hasty in closing down the old site. Only do this once the vast majority of your users are happily on the new one.

The other method of bringing in major changes is to roll these out very gradually. Most active websites with large user bases make constant tiny incremental adjustments. These are normally so small or insufficiently radical they don't risk raising anyone's ire.

The disadvantage of this method is that it can take an awful long time, and also perhaps a major immediate change is what is required.   If you are too cautious you may just be falling behind your competitors or not changing quickly enough in fast-paced market conditions. For example, think of how outdated the old banking messages would be in this new, post credit crunch era.

Being too slow and making only planned gradual changes can risk losing users to rival sites who dared to move more quickly.

In summary, change is best when it is planned and involves active consultation with your user base. Remember, these people, for all their occasional cussedness, are your lifeblood and responsible for your profits.

Top Tips for Revamping your Website

- Don't bring in major changes all at once without consultation
- Do communicate any major changes in advance. Keep on communicating and don't assume everyone has got the picture from a single communique
- Consider running a 'beta' version in parallel with old site, so users adjust to the new site and gradually adopt it
- Form focus groups of frequent users to get their views and opinions on intended site alternations
- Also consider rolling out changes slowly, bit by bit
- Do listen and reflect user comments when you make changes
- If your changes still turn out to be unpopular, don't feel afraid to return to earlier versions. Obstinacy to unpopular moves won't solve the problem!

About the Author

Marc has over 10 years' expertise in founding and running successful growth businesses that have a significant online element.

In 1999 he created a retail investor information website *Sharepages* which he subsequently floated on the AIM market as *Knowledge Technology Solutions PLC* "KTS" in 2000. He led the business through periods of significant growth, serving as Chief Executive for eight years. In 2007, following an acquisition of a complementing technology company, he stepped down from the KTS board and continued as consultant to KTS until he created One News Page in late 2008.

Marc holds a B.Sc. in Physics with Management Studies from the University of Sussex, and a

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About OneNewsPage.com

One News Page is a global news aggregator that continuously monitors news headlines from trusted online sources - including newswires, newspapers and broadcasters.

The One News Page website (http://www.onenewspage.com) offers live access to top news and analysis sources. The site attracts an audience of news-seeking visitors from all around the World. Further details about visitor demographics are provided on the advertising information page.