6

Putting It All Together and Selling Online

You've got your user research and user personas for the people visiting your website. Now what? How do you turn that valuable information into a strategic advantage by building a better website? By applying a few techniques taken from the field of Information Architecture and defining "user paths" through your website's content.

In terms of Internet marketing, it's not all about the main website that everyone sees. The landing pages (behind the scenes, separate from the main website but critical for every marketing campaign) also need to be built. What makes a good landing page, and how do you decide when to make multiple landing pages? This chapter focuses not only on how to design a user-informed main website, but how to create compelling landing pages for your marketing campaigns.

Designing Your Website

Now that you've done your user research and developed personas (from Chapter 5, "The Audience Is Listening (What Will You Say?)"), you are ready to put that information to work and redesign your website. It's best to start from scratch, and not get tied down to your existing website's navigation or terminology.

To take the next steps, apply some of the best practices from the field of Information Architecture (IA). This ensures a thoughtful, user-centered approach based on the information or tasks website visitors are trying to accomplish on your website.

After developing a skeleton for the complete standalone website, you need to turn your attention to landing page design. Landing pages are often your potential clients' first experience of your website and brand (as they typically are accessed by clicking an ad or responding to a marketing campaign). Relevant, compelling landing pages with clear calls to action are critical to long-term campaign success.

You can set up your landing pages to act as a continuous survey of how your marketing message fares in the real world, getting almost real-time results to hone that message. We go into greater detail about what makes a good landing page later in this chapter, in the "Landing Page Basics" section.

Chapter 7, "Making Websites That Work," goes into more detail about the development process, rolling out a new version of a website, and related considerations. This chapter focuses on the initial website design process itself, instead.

Incorporating Information Architecture Techniques

Although building websites requires many specialized skills (team roles summarized in Figure 7.5 in Chapter 7), design by committee leads to the sure death both of a concept and team morale.

Someone has to be responsible for the design; some people's opinions, wants, and needs really do matter more than others'. The user advocate should overrule other team members' preferences, informed by user research and the agreed upon priority personas.

While the website's graphic design is informed by the branding and design standards of the company, the design of the infrastructure used to present the information fails if it doesn't help website visitors accomplish their goals.

So, the website's information architecture—the organization of its navigation and the flow of its content—must revolve around the user tasks, scenarios, and goals.

IA is a large field and includes the categorization of many things beyond websites. Within website design, the term *information architecture* can be used loosely in

conversation and mean many things; a subset is listed in Table 6.1. Each item represents critical aspects of the website design process, and associated research activities involve direct contact with website users.

Table 6.1 Information Architecture Concepts and Outputs

Concept	Deliverable
Arrangement or organization of pages on a website	Sitemap
Mechanism for visitors to move around the website	Navigation specification (menus, breadcrumbs) On-site search specification
Labels for categories	List of words to be used in website navigation and headings
Critical elements needed on each page	Page-level information design—page layouts or wireframes (which are typically turned into Hypertext Markup Language [HTML] templates)

ADDITIONAL READING

For a great foundation on the tenets of website information architecture, refer to *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web: Designing Large-Scale Web Sites*, by Peter Morville and Louis Rosenfeld.

You'll get sound advice on how to meet the needs of website visitors when designing a navigation system, labeling system, and searching system for your website.

Experiment with an Unconventional User-Driven Architecture: McKinley.com

McKinley is a Michigan-based real estate company. Through user research and testing, it evolved a somewhat unconventional website organization that specifically addresses the needs of its visitors and its business goal of leasing apartments. The website has the "regular" website categories (About Us, Careers, News, Contact Us), but the design de-emphasizes that navigation by placing it at the top right of the page (see Figure 6.1).

Instead, the company devotes the main part of the home page to helping visitors hone in on specific apartment communities in their portfolio while featuring lovely photographs of the communities.

Figure 6.1 *The McKinley.com home page emphasizing the apartment finder over the "main" website navigation.*

One level down from the home page, McKinley's website navigation guides visitors through the apartment-finding process (see Figures 6.2 and 6.3). After visitors select a state on the left side of the home page, they are taken to a map and offered the choice of cities within that state.

The horizontal bar at the top of the page shows the visitor's position in the process of selecting an apartment: first select a state, then a city, then a community within the city, then a floor plan, and then a particular apartment with that floor plan.

Selecting a community is an interactive process where visitors choose the amenities they need (number of bedrooms, baths, other features such as school district, patio, bus accessible, and the like) and is shown McKinley communities that meet their criteria.

In the previous website organization, the website visitor had to choose a community without knowing its amenities, but many apartment-seekers did not have a particular community in mind and were more focused on certain features instead.

The Information Architecture Process

Information architecture can be created through careful and challenging work done by a trained expert. It can also be done by building elements from the ground up via user research activities such as card sorting.

Figure 6.2 *Michigan apartment finder, leading visitors through the process of locating an apartment community.*

Figure 6.3 *Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti apartment finder, that interactively sorts the list of available communities based on specific selections of amenities.*

We generally approach it from both top-down (via expert analysis) and bottom-up (via interviews, content inventory of existing or competitive websites, card sorts)

techniques, piecing together the website framework and content organization through many iterations.

Websites have some typical design patterns and categories. Many websites repeat familiar navigation structures. such as a single or multiple sections describing products or services or an About Us section with company information. About Us might also include some investor or job applicant information, or if the company is large, those sections might merit their own navigation sections.

There are usually fairly standard on-page conventions to follow, as well. On each page, there is typically a company logo, the navigation, the content itself, and a footer repeating or adding to the navigation.

For e-commerce websites, products in the database may have many descriptors, some of which are more important than others and deserve more visual emphasis. These are the "easy wins" in the process, though. The actual challenge comes in trying to organize nonobvious things. For example, do your visitors expect to locate your products by purpose, industry, or features?

So, the process of defining the information architecture (creating the sitemap, designing the navigation and on-site search, and designing the layout of individual page types within the website) is a combination of reusing existing and familiar elements with your own special customizations to suit the needs of your customers and the specifics of your product offering.

Take a collaborative and iterative approach to the information architecture development. Assemble the right team and proceed through the steps of envisioning and specifying your website through applying best practices and your user research. And don't forget to test along the way.

Investigate and Inform Your Information Architecture

At this point, we assume that you've already done your homework on who your website visitors and potential customers are. You've read the sections "Listen to and Watch Your Audience" and "Develop Website Personas" in Chapter 5.

You should have a few website personas that you've developed from audience interviews. The audience information you uncovered will help determine how your website's information architecture takes shape and exactly which words appear on your navigation system's labels.

Develop a Website Skeleton or Wireframe

Now that you have a good idea about who might be a potential website visitor, you need to think about how those visitors will move through your website content to become a customer (or take another specific action along a path).

These paths through your content are defined by the website's information architecture. Some of the paths support the goals of website visitors. ("I want to find information about a service" or "I want to buy a birthday gift for Aunt Nancy.") Other paths support the goals of your company (for example, to increase website conversions and generate more qualified leads or completed sales).

It's important to realize that these two distinct goal paths (website visitor and company) may or may not completely overlap. The trick is to find the sweet spot where both paths overlap enough so that both the business sales goals and the customers are supported.

After you've developed multiple visitor paths to support different personas and different goals, an overall picture of your website structure starts to take shape. Think of this as a bottom-up method of creating your navigation and website content hierarchy.

Most people instinctively start with a top-down methodology, defining the navigation labels on the home page, and then moving on to subsequent main pages. We find that the bottom-up method is more organic and yields better results because you're focusing on the website personas and their goals, not a predetermined idea about how a corporate website is organized.

Scenarios and Paths

Start with a website persona and a primary goal. What is a potential customer trying to do? Map out a scenario, or set of content chunks, of what a "good" interaction would look like. What would visitors want to do (and what information does your company want them to have at each step?)?

Does your company have additional business requirements that affect the scenario, such as website visitors must submit their email address before downloading a whitepaper? This impacts your interaction scenario.

Often, it's helpful to start by thinking out loud with a story about a website visitor. Then figure out what you'd need to make that goal path happen, and what information should be on the different pages throughout the scenario.

Arranging Multiple Scenarios

You might want to map out bits of content or interaction on sticky notes and start arranging them on a whiteboard. After you've got a couple of goal paths (or scenarios) defined, you'll probably start to see how some of them overlap or where some content can be reused. Fiddle around with the sticky notes to reuse content where it makes sense but doesn't negatively affect the scenarios.

Eventually, after working through each business goal and website persona (down to the potential new employee looking for job openings), you'll have a detailed idea of the myriad potential paths for the new information architecture.

Now is the time to draw on the content inventory you performed back at the beginning of the project (or do it now!). The content inventory is the list of the existing content and the new content that you want on your website.

Consider how users would look for your products or services. Does that change how you arrange the much larger set of content that you now have? And did you find that there are different ways in which users navigate or search your content based on your user research? You'll have to make choices to accommodate that. This might feed back into your scenarios that you've written up.

At this point, it really is a question of trial and error, putting pencil to paper (or using more sticky notes), and going through multiple iterations to make the magic happen. The end result is that you've created a large diagram mapping out all the primary and secondary scenarios for the website.

Define the Navigation Structure

Recall that we looked at the language your website visitors are using to talk about your products and services in "Speak Your Audience's Language: The Real Search Engine Optimization" in Chapter 5.

The same audience-oriented language research that informs your website copy to improve search engine rankings also informs your information architecture development. Why refer to a product page as "frozen milk fantasies" when everyone else simply says "ice cream flavors?"

Simply put, the more you learn about your website visitors and align the website language to their orientation, the more successful the website will be at gathering and converting potential prospects.

Define the structure of your navigation system to account for each of the content chunks (sticky notes) you identified earlier when you created scenarios and to accommodate the classification scheme that you applied to your content. Use the website visitor's language to create meaningful labels for the links that let visitors navigate through the website content. Leverage the keyword research you've done for search engine optimization (SEO) and paid search purposes for your information architecture's navigation labels and page titles.

MULTIPLE DATA SOURCES MAKE MAGIC

The ideal situation is when you can gather data from multiple sources to help with language choices for the website.

Can you access the "real language" work behind-the-scenes in your keyword programs (SEO and paid search)? What about gathering web analytics data to identify which pages are more popular than others? This can give you an idea of what labels and language resonates (or doesn't) with website visitors, and to identify which keywords drive more traffic.

We firmly believe you can never have too much data; it just takes a bit of effort to gather it and wade through it to make better decisions (and therefore a better information architecture).

Rough Out the Page Layout

Now that you've got an overall website structure, navigation labels, and individual page titles, you need to think about what the individual pages will look like at a more detailed level. Essentially, you'll create a content specification (you won't be writing the website copy—leave that to an SEO or marketing copywriter).

But the information architect on the project should specify which content chunks need to appear on specific pages. The information architecture not only includes the content specification for each page but also the general page layout for the individual elements. Will the navigation options appear on the left with mouseover text or flyouts for secondary navigation links? Where does the search box go? How do you lay out product descriptions?

The relative emphasis of various elements on each page also needs to be considered. Where should the visitor's eye go first? And second? What is the relative importance of the various information items on a given page?

For many of the industry's best practices, follow the web conventions identified in "The Basics: What to Fix Before Testing" in Chapter 7.

Many companies prefer to define the rough page layout and overall website "skeleton" in a flowcharting program such as Visio. You can use the flowchart, or simple paper prototypes, and conduct basic usability testing with these simple tools, before the first piece of HTML code has been written. See "Beyond Best Practices: User Research" in Chapter 7.

The Full Information Architecture

To complete the website information architecture, make sure you include all the various methods that someone can use to navigate through your website.

This includes defining a sitemap, which acts somewhat like the index of a book. If you think of your overall navigation structure as a table of contents, the sitemap is an index at-a-glance view of all the website content, just arranged thematically instead of alphabetically.

Do you have an on-site search function? Having on-site search is a goldmine, because you get to see the words your visitors type to find content and you can use their search terms to expand or revise existing web content. Yet, a poorly working on-site search can do more harm than good by frustrating your users. Sometimes the search engines built in to content management systems require a fair investment before they work well.

You might consider not using the out-of-the-box search, but using Google custom search, which at least lets you handle off-site SEO and on-site search with the same feature set and optimization strategy. If you cannot find something that you know exists on your website using your search function, take it out until you can get it to work properly.

Don't forget that a primary path for most website visitors' first visit to your website is via landing pages that are built as part of a marketing campaign, paid search program, or organic search program. Landing pages, by their very nature, are not part of the main website navigation or hierarchy, but act as standalone content "islands" for groups of keywords.

The development of landing pages is related more to the paid search advertising work, not the primary website information architecture. In some cases, however, you'll want to tie landing pages into the main website. Look at your website's traffic patterns (assuming you already have landing pages) to see how to best support this content path.

We cover landing page development in greater detail in the second half of this chapter.

Test the Information Architecture

Finally, when you've got a paper prototype or HTML wireframe of your new information architecture, run it by a small group of people who match your personas to confirm that the labels, placement, and hierarchy make sense to potential website visitors. The exact method depends on your timeline and budget. Several options are available and discussed in Chapter 7.

For more information, see "Qualitative User Analysis: Observations, Usability Tests" and "Beyond Best Practices: User Research" in Chapter 7.

Graphic Design Comes Later

To those of us untrained in graphic design, this part can feel like magic. In a good design, the designer and the design process recedes and the meaning in the words, pictures, and media are center stage. Yet, while part of it is an art, much of successful graphic design comes from the application of known principles of layout and emphasis.

Robin Williams, in *The Non-Designers Design Book*, boils graphic composition down to a few essential principles:

- Proximity

- Alignment

- Repetition

- Contrast

Good designs please the eye and convey meaning through grouping similar items together in *proximity* and leaving whitespace in between.

Good composition comes from placing items on the page intentionally and with visual connections (*alignment*) from one item to another: In a photograph of a plane for sale, the nose of the plane might point at the call to action link or phone pad.

Repetition of key elements and styles unify a design and a website. Basic repetition of font styles and shapes in the design can be accomplished and unified across a website through cascading style sheets. Yet it is more than mindless consistency.

And good design relies on repetition's seeming opposite: contrast. A designer can emphasize certain elements through implementing vivid *contrast* through elements such as a hierarchy of colors, typefaces, font sizes, or any visual element.

A Process Overview

A veteran graphic designer understands the relative importance of on-page elements and makes informed choices about what items to keep together, what to repeat, and where to apply contrast. Clear priorities from the user research and business goals of the website inform the design. At this stage, the work of the information architect is to collaborate with and guide the designer.

Designers may want to subtly stylize the links or use a clean simple approach, which was shown in Figure 6.1. In this website, the site's navigation is intentionally de-emphasized with low contrast and tucked up against the upper-right corner.

Instead, the emphasis is placed on the "find an apartment" element, which is in the place where some websites have their main website navigation. Unconventional arrangements like this one come from a strong working relationship between the information architect and the graphic designer.

This approach of handing off the rough layout to a designer will sound like a "waterfall" project management approach, where individual project stages must be completed before the next phase starts. Of course, the best approach comes where the graphic designer is involved throughout the project at a low level, asking questions that will help the information architect and the stakeholders prioritize website elements.

Having more people involved in the process for a longer period of time helps access the wisdom of a larger group and leaves time for the participants' subconscious mind to process and solve conflicts. However, our sense is that the results are better when there is clear ownership of certain stages.

The graphic designer benefits from agreement on the elements to include in the design before the design work starts. Page elements are much easier to revise within a simple Visio website mock-up than in beautiful, layered Photoshop designs.

Information Architecture Case Study

We recently collaborated with a nonprofit debt-counseling organization to develop a new information architecture for their website, and to guide them on which phrases would be useful to emphasize for SEO. To handle the SEO work, we applied our word market analysis technique, outlined in "Evaluate Your Keyphrases in the Context of the Entire Word Market" in Chapter 5.

User Personas and Keyword Analysis

First, competitive research, stakeholder interviews, and user research helped to define user personas for their target website users. Next, we did a content inventory of their existing website. The user personas helped the team to identify meaningful paths based on user goals through the website content.

We performed the keyword analysis process simultaneously to help define the navigation system's labels in the new information architecture. There was much discussion between the information architects and the SEO analysts as the group identified the best keywords to use for both organic search and the information architecture.

High-Level Information Architecture

Next, the team identified a new page structure and hierarchy, based on the content inventory and the user paths through that content. Figure 6.4 shows the website's top-level structure.

Figure 6.4 *The website organization, including a proposed Community section.*

After identifying the two versions of the home page content, one for the blog and one for the main website with community pages, the team worked on the information architecture for the next level down (see Figures 6.5 and 6.6).
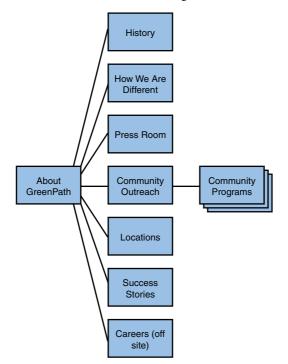

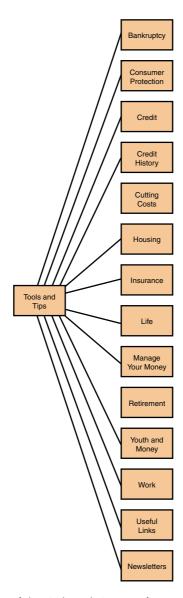**Figure 6.5** *The structure of the About set of pages.*

Figure 6.6 *The structure of the Tools and Tips set of pages.*

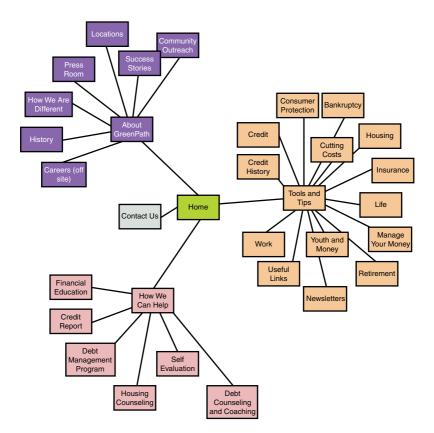Figure 6.7 shows what the overall website content structure looks like.

Figure 6.7 *The complete information architecture for the website (minus the Community/Blog section).*

Page Templates with Content Specified

We collaborated to develop a couple of different page templates, illustrating how a new layout and organization could provide more room for content while removing irrelevant (off-goal) aspects of their existing pages (see Figures 6.8, 6.9, and 6.10).
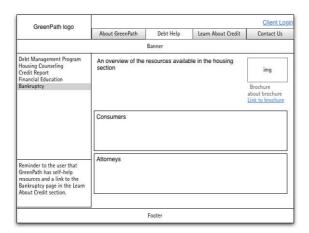
Figure 6.8 *A content specification from a deeper-level page.*

Figure 6.9 *Another website page template well below the home page.*

Figure 6.10 *The specification for the contact form.*

How the Website Mission Can Affect Information Architecture

GreenPath Debt Solutions, a nationwide, nonprofit organization, is committed to providing high-quality financial education to consumers struggling with debt. One of the purposes of GreenPath's website,www.greenpath.com, is to provide helpful money-management resources.

When a visitor lands on educational content within the website, GreenPath considers this a successful outcome. Because of this particular measure of success, the information architecture and navigation system labels took on an even greater significance. This also impacted the measurement criteria for success. Instead of counting the number of website visitors who completed an online form (for example, a sale), the team closely monitors traffic for the educational pages.

Designing Your Landing Pages

Landing pages, in their most basic form, are the website pages that you show when a potential customer clicks an advertisement. The ad could be a text ad or banner on a search engine or on another type of informational website. You may consider using landing pages for email marketing, billboards, broadcast, or direct mail drops.

Some people use the term *landing page* to mean the top-level page in each navigation section of a website. (That's definitely not what we mean throughout this book.)

Ideally, each ad or promotion would have its own custom landing page. In practice, people use a mixture of custom landing pages and existing website pages in marketing campaigns. Custom landing pages that are separate from your website typically have a look and feel similar to your website, are hosted on the same domain, but are unreachable except via clicking a link in your campaign or by knowing the exact URL.

They are often almost self-contained mini-websites, with context about your brand, your services, and, usually, a targeted offer or contact form, all on one page. The landing page typically displays sales copy that is a logical extension of the offer in the ad.

Let's walk through a few landing page design basics, including what makes a good (or a bad) landing page, and how you decide when you need a separate landing page in your marketing plan.

Landing Page Basics

Landing pages are a critical component to online advertising that many savvy marketers miss. You need to deliver the exact information that someone is looking for, in a compelling way. For this reason, landing pages are not a "one size fits all" undertaking. You generally want to have multiple landing pages for multiple marketing needs.

These are pages that are skimmed quickly, so large and legible fonts, simple language, and clear next steps are critical.

To continue the conversation with the website visitor you started in the ad, the landing page should

- Reinforce the ad clicked by the visitor
- Be long enough to provide proper context, but be easy to skim
- Have a visual focus
- Have clear calls to action (phone call or contact form, or both), avoiding distracting elements
- Most important, offer something of value to the website visitor

Reinforce the Offer in Headline and Copy

The landing page is the point of entry for someone new to your website. To get there, visitors have clicked a paid search ad, a banner ad, or email that interests them. To avoid disorienting your new visitors, it's important to repeat and support the offer that initially drew them there.

So, the landing page should be consistent with the advertising used to attract the visitor. Reinforce the offer in your page's headline, images, and copy. Use persuasive copy that supports the claims made in your ad that triggered the clickthrough in the first place.

The headline should refer directly to the place the visitor came from or to the ad copy and relevant keywords that drove the clickthrough to the landing page.

Write Just Enough, Clearly

A key misconception about landing page copy is "the shorter, the better." Good landing page copy is well organized and easily scannable, but that doesn't translate into short. Good landing page copy can be actually very long.

All subheadings and links should be written with clear language. Opt for "Request More Information" rather than "Got 2 Minutes?" and use "Testimonials" instead of "Don't Take Our Word for It."

Make liberal use of the following:

- **Subheads and bulleted lists:** Make it easy to scan.

- **Descriptions:** Support their information needs.

- **Testimonials:** Leverage the human need for reinforcement in decision making.

- **Guarantees:** Put your buyer at ease.

Avoid any graphical or navigational elements that might imply that visitors are at the bottom of the page before they actually have scrolled down through all the page content. A long landing page is fine, as long as the visitor knows to scroll.

Help with Hero Shots

Ensure that your landing pages appeal to both visual and textual learners. Often, the primary visual focus of a landing page is a "hero shot"—a picture or drawing of the item you're marketing. Limit the hero shot to the main product or a single element.

If you're selling something that doesn't lend itself well to pictures, try a diagram of how it works or the value it provides. Avoid inserting obvious stock images of smiling businesspeople or indecipherable abstract images.

Show something that has meaning, if at all possible. Figure 6.11 has a hero shot of a beautiful room featuring the product (interior wood paneling). The page emphasizes product benefits and invites visitors to call. A link to a brochure request/contact form is available, but de-emphasized.

Figure 6.11 *A landing page with a hero shot at left.*

Figure 6.12 has a hero shot of a before and after dental work, directly featuring the results: a beautiful smile.

Figure 6.12 *A landing page with hero shot and a web form.*

Requirement: Clear Call to Action

Both above and below the fold, each landing page should repeat the call to action that you want the website visitor to take. There's nothing worse than seeing a call to action in the header scrolling out of the way so that the website visitor can get to the "meat" of the page, only to have nowhere to go after reading your copy.

If you've opted for a contact form on the landing page, make sure that it captures the absolute minimum amount of information required at that step in your sales process for the next step with the prospect. Always assume that you can get more data from a lead, after it's been qualified. There's no need to pry.

Interactive details on forms, such as slow load times of optional fields, do affect the conversion rate. Make sure the form is clearly identified and is visually distinct from the rest of the page content.

Place the call to action on the click text or Submit button itself. Make it easy for visitors to complete the action. And don't just label the button Submit. Instead, label the button with what action the user is taking, such as Sign Up or Request Information.

Reduce Distractions

Clarity comes from what you eliminate. Many landing pages eliminate the website's navigation, perhaps offering a few links to supporting content but looking to capture the visitor's attention and motivate the next step entirely on the one page.

Other distractions include the following:

- **Illegible text:** Strive for 12 point text. It's a good standard size for most body text fonts.

- **Unrelated copy and graphics:** Make sure the landing pages match the creative campaign look and message.

- **Long wait time to load media and animations:** If you plan to use rich media on the landing page, make sure the page is designed to be usable before it loads completely.

Offer Something of Value

Always remember: *People convert because you offer them something they need.* Reciprocity is key.

You are asking someone for contact or credit card information. Make sure you offer something equally valuable in return. That's the idea behind a whitepaper: In return for getting to read some helpful information, you're sharing your own information.

The Design Cycle

Your sales process is the primary driver behind your landing page scheme, and your marketing plan helps you identify how granular to make your landing pages.

You should develop a landing page strategy by asking a couple of key questions:

- At what point in the sales process are people reaching this landing page?
- Who are these people? Have we developed user personas?

To design a landing page strategy, you

1. Develop the strategy based on your sales process and marketing campaign needs.
2. Define the conversion or conversions.
3. Build a landing page template, collect graphic elements, and create a design concept.
4. Write targeted copy for each landing page.
5. Track, test, and modify the landing page concept, copy, graphics, and so on over time.

Your user personas, developed as described in Chapter 5, guide your Internet marketing strategy and your landing page design, as well.

Getting More Granular: When Do You Need a New Landing Page?

Many people are confused about how many landing pages to create for their website. Let your sales process and marketing efforts define the level of granularity. Are you reaching out to prospects in a specific print ad or a paid search campaign based on a group of keywords?

Think about how, why, and when leads are converted into sales. This is where you'll find the answer to the question of landing page granularity.

Needs During the Sales Process

You can create a unique landing page for each need during the sales process. Recall the sales funnel (Figure 3.1) from Chapter 3, "Building a Metrics-Driven Practice."

In the beginning of a search for a solution, searchers may only be aware of their pain, without an ultimate solution in mind. They might need help taming their fun (but a little too exuberant) puppy, or they might need to research software to help

automate certain business processes. Whatever the situation, people typically start researching their need rather than their solution.

Then, they move through an information-gathering phase into identifying what categories solutions will help them. It might go like this. My old car keeps breaking down. Should I get a different car or should I consider a combination of public transportation and car sharing through a service like Zipcar?

I might look at informational websites in the beginning of the process and then settle on a general solution set (for example, an electric scooter) that is the intersection of all of the known solutions to the issue and my individual preferences.

After a category of the possible solution has been selected, people look to individual vendors within that type. They compare features, benefits, and costs to make a decision between a known set of products or services.

Draw on your user research to define the phases relevant to the searching and decision process for your products and services. Then, prepare materials to support people at different phases.

You might start by spending time interacting with the content on your website, downloading several files, and "reading up" on your company. Look to learn not just about your company, but about how the industry or solution space works overall.

Completing this homework helps you identify what information you're currently offering to the information needed. It might identify gaps in the process that need to be filled by new website content or new landing pages.

Here's the key take-home message: Include multiple conversion points for different stages of the buying process. Each conversion point is a potential landing page opportunity.

Long-Term Maintenance Is Critical

Maintaining your landing pages is critical to their success. Not only does optimizing them continuously drive improvements in paid search conversions, but a failure to maintain landing pages long term can have the opposite effect.

Unfortunately, because landing pages are "disconnected" from the main website, landing pages can be "out of sight, out of mind." Returning visitors, including the team that maintains the website, do not typically view these pages.

Yet, because landing pages are the most common point of entry for new visitors, and specifically for visitors where you are paying a third party to get them to visit your website (search engine, email campaign management software, banner ad network), it is critical that these pages be included in your periodic website reviews.

Otherwise, landing page content can become stale or out-of-date, promote the previous year's trade show, flaunt a copyright date a few years old, or even showcase old versions of whitepapers, products, or services you no longer offer.

In rare cases, changes to website infrastructure or content with expiration dates might send visitors you're paying for to a Page Not Found page. Ugh! (See "Plan for Graceful Failure" in Chapter 7 for help on avoiding Page Not Found glitches.)

If you build landing pages, you must commit to maintain them. Visit and review these pages during regularly scheduled website maintenance. It's best to prevent the error, but if you have bad landing page content out there, an alert paid search manager can tell from the numbers in the paid search account which landing pages are beyond their expiration dates.

How? These pages typically perform more poorly than up-to-date pages, converting fewer visitors to leads or sales. Following the metrics trail can show your team which pages need life support or at the least, a refresh. A savvy paid search manager can alert the website design team to issues on the website that have not yet been discovered, such as pages whose content has expired or web forms that have gone awry.

Maintenance "gotchas" you can periodically check for include the following:

- Broken links from these pages to your main website

- Broken contact forms

- Broken calculator or other interactive elements

- Outdated copyright information

- Outdated descriptions of products or services

- Promoting last year's trade show dates

- Promoting whitepapers that have been replaced by newer, better content

- Layout errors where template elements (such as a promo banner linking to content within your website) do not play nice with on-page content

We have seen these issues occur on websites, and when you've paid to have a visitor find these glitches, it's a bad experience all around.

Optimizing Your Landing Pages

So, after lists of best practices, we have to offer the following caveat: It depends. Your website, your product offering, and your users might be different from the users and websites that inspired our best practice guidelines.

For instance, a commonly recommended landing page design principle is to remove the website navigation elements at the top or side of the page. To conform to the expectations of your visitors and the terms of service of any paid search you may be running, you still need to retain the types of links commonly relegated to the footer (Contact Us, Privacy Policy, or Terms of Use for the website) on your landing pages.

When we remove the primary website navigation and compare the performance of two similar pages, we often see that for certain kinds of services, pages with links to relevant information perform better than isolated pages. If your readers need more information to make a decision, then by all means offer them more.

All of these best practices are good things to test on your situation. The best thing you can do is to get landing pages up and test alternative versions to improve your landing pages incrementally. This section walks you through the basic testing design and analysis to optimize landing pages.

When to Optimize

Over the course of your campaign, after you've identified which keyphrases are your best performers, the landing page conversion rate becomes the critical point to improve.

We delve a little more deeply into paid search metrics in Chapter 3, in the "Paid Search KPIs" section, and into paid search management in Chapter 7, in the section "Extending Your Reach with Paid Search Advertising."

The cycle of paid search optimization and management starts with keywords and ad copy, but over time the emphasis in a mature paid search account turns specifically to conversion rate optimization through landing page testing and improvements.

In addition, the quality of your landing pages affects the costs for your paid search advertising quite directly. Google AdWords evaluates landing pages to determine minimum bids. Low-quality landing pages are assumed to represent a low-quality website. Landing pages do not affect ad rank, however.

Table 6.2 shows the performance from a sample, fictional paid search account for the lead-generation company Happy Puppy. In the first months, the paid search management focused on increasing performance through keyphrase and ad copy optimization, focusing on the keywords that were most relevant to searchers for doggie daycare and training.

The numbers in bold in the first two rows of Table 6.2 show areas of improved performance leading to improvements in the key metric in bold (see bottom row), cost per lead.

Table 6.2 Example Paid Search Performance over Time

	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4	Month 5	Month 6	Month 7
Average cost per click	**$4.40**	**$3.72**	**$3.61**	$3.61	$3.61	$3.61	$3.61
Lead-conversion rate	0.8%	0.8%	0.8%	**1.0%**	**1.2%**	**1.44%**	**1.7%**
Number of clicks for a lead	125	125	125	100	83	69	58
Cost per lead	**$550**	**$465**	**$451**	**$361**	**$301**	**$251**	**$212**

The benefits of keyphrase and ad copy optimization show a lower cost-per-click amount, month over month. Starting in the fourth month, the Happy Puppy team focused on improving performance through targeted landing page changes. Although these landing page changes did not increase the number of visits to the website or clicks on the ads, the landing page adjustments improved the conversion of visits to leads, lowering their overall cost per lead.

Never forget that landing page management is your most important long-term paid search activity.

Use Your User Research

A critical aspect of landing page optimization is to consider for whom you're actually optimizing the landing pages. To optimize a landing page, consider the design of a landing page based on both

- How Google AdWords (or any paid search vendor) interprets the page, which in turn affects your bid and campaign costs
- How visitors interpret the page (for example, whether it is a compelling page that generates qualified new leads)

Landing page categories often vary in their conversion rates. Some of the variation in conversion rates is due to the specificity of the search terms used. For example, product pages might be linked with the most specific search queries.

Often, the key to optimizing conversion rates on landing pages that pass the "good landing page" design tests is to revisit the needs of website visitors. That means going back to your user personas developed in Chapter 5 and conducting user testing as described in Chapter 7.

The goal is to align landing pages as closely as possible to the needs of website visitors. In addition to user personas and usability testing, you can use user interviews to learn more about your website visitors.

These interviews can include such questions or prompts as

- What information did you expect to see on the landing page?

- How easily can you identify product details, price, or shipping costs?

- What information would help you make a decision to buy from this company (or contact this company for more details)?

- What criteria will you use in your purchase decision?

- Tell me about the last time you purchased a product like this.

You also can examine similar pages on competitor websites to gain insight about the methods of your competition. Just locate and click your competitor's ads to see their landing pages.

In addition, try to gather quantitative behaviorial data from your analytics accounts to learn about visitor behavior on individual landing pages. This data helps you locate potential problems for follow-up in the scripted interviews and help define the direction of landing page usability testing.

Then, get the next version in front of users and test again. If it's quick to build a new page in your content management system (CMS), build a new page. If it's tedious and labor intensive to build a new page, try a noncoded visual mock-up showing potential changes to selected landing pages. You can use the visual mock-ups during usability testing and prioritize changes to landing pages based on supporting visitors in accomplishing their goals (and yours).

How to Measure

First, you need to set up alternative landing pages, direct traffic to them, and measure which one results in more of what you want: web leads, phone calls, sales, or perhaps all of these. This stage is where your "close the loop" details come into play, because you don't want to optimize your pages to get you more leads if the page brings in more but *poorly qualified* leads that result in *fewer* sales.

The key to clear interpretation of test results is to define how to measure success ahead of seeing the results and with enough time to get a true sample to interpret.

Essentially, landing page testing is hypothesis testing, just like you might have learned in school. You put two (or more, but two is simpler for a start) alternate pages into play, with the null hypothesis being there is no difference between them. Then, you collect data on how they perform, measuring against predetermined key performance indicators (KPIs).

Here's where we'll get a little statistical. You are looking to determine whether there is a difference between the performance of your two alternates. So, a critical

question is what size difference over what sample size is "different enough" to make a decision to eliminate one of the two options.

The good news is that you don't have to work this out from scratch. You can take advantage of existing calculators to determine the appropriate difference you need to see in conversion counts or rates over what sample size to call one alternative the "winner" over another.

You can find free online tools that have the statistical test baked right in such as Google Website Optimizer. You can also use online calculators such as splittester.com to do the calculations for you.

Google Website Optimizer randomizes testing of landing pages from Google AdWords campaigns. It can also be used outside of AdWords paid search advertising to manage website or web page versions for testing. Google Website Optimizer interprets the test data for you, letting you know when you've reached a threshold of "enough difference and enough samples" to make a change.

Figure 6.13 shows an example of something that looks like a large difference in conversion rate, but is not yet "high confidence" for an actual decision.
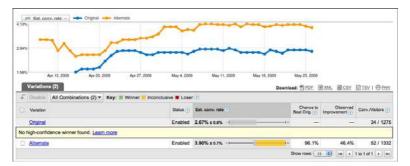

Figure 6.13   *Google Website Optimizer test results for a landing page test.*

In this case, the original version and the alternate had different conversion rates (2.67% versus 3.90%). The sample size was 1,275 visitors for the original version of the page and 1,332 visitors for the alternate. Yet, according to the graph, we have not yet achieved high confidence in this test. The tool advises us to run the test longer to increase the confidence that the alternate landing page is the winner.

Granular Testing Within the Page

Several tools provide data at a more granular level than web analytics or Google Website Optimizer. If you want to see what users are doing on the page before they leave or fill out a shopping cart or web form, you can use tools such as Crazy Egg or ClickTale to capture mouse movement and clicks.

You can also use ClickTale to gather analytics on form fields, such as which ones are filled out before the page is abandoned, which ones are avoided, and so on, to streamline your web form.

You can find more information about on-page and form analytics in the "Quantitative User Research: Form Analytics and A/B Testing" section in Chapter 7.

You Have Data. Now What?

The two goals when using the data from these tools are as follows:

- Take all that you've learned from the data and begin a conversation with your team about what you like and don't like on the suggested landing pages.

- Determine what changes you could make immediately to your landing pages and what approach could improve them long term.

Summary

To ensure that you're following a solid information architecture process, make sure that you

- Use user research to inform your website's sitemap and page layouts.

- Are willing to do unconventional things to support your website's primary personae and their most common scenarios.

- Test your website's arrangement and layout (using paper prototyping or with coded pages, whichever is faster and simpler).

- Use the information architecture developed to collaborate with a professional graphic designer to make your pages pop.

Follow best practices in landing page design, but test everything so you know what fits your market and your prospects.

Good landing pages are

- Strongly aligned with the marketing and keyphrases that visitors used to reach it.

- Useful. The landing page provides clear value in exchange for the visitor's time or personal information.

- Have one or more clear calls to action.

- Simple and focused. You lose visitors if they have to work hard to find the information they need by reading through irrelevant copy or clicking to other pages

- Asking for the bare minimum. Avoid asking for too much; capture only as much information as you absolutely need at this point in your sales process.

- Usable. You don't want to frustrate or confuse the landing page visitor.

- Up-to-date and working. Commit to your landing pages for as long as your campaigns are running. Check them periodically for glitches or out-of-date content.