5

The Audience Is Listening (What Will You Say?)

A mistake many websites make is that they are really written for the company rather than for the company's potential customers or clients. Perhaps that is because making a website involves so many different roles both inside and outside the company (marketing team, sales team, IT/infrastructure, creative folks, some of whom may be external vendors).

Getting agreement from that long list of players exhausts the energy of the project and leaves little room to get a customer involved, much less the number of them that would be required to get a good cross-section of their potential intentions, desires, wishes, and needs. Too often, a website's information architecture reflects the organization of the company instead of the needs of the website's target audience. Let's put an end to this!

Where Do You Start?

How you get started depends on your goal for the website. If it's a personal blog meant for you to express yourself, start with what's on your mind. It's all about you. If it's a website for an organization with a mission, such as a nonprofit food bank serving a particular town or a global pharmaceutical company looking to cure a particular form of cancer, the place to start is outside your organization.

Start with the people you are trying to reach with the website. To make a connection with them, your website has to be all about what *they* need, which is related to (but not the same as) everything about you or your organization. A great place to start is to list the groups you are trying to reach, understand their goals, and lastly move to the language they use to describe what they need.

Your plan should include building a website and writing web copy to show your customer how your product or service will solve their problem. This chapter covers audience analysis, persona development, and choosing the right words so that your audience recognizes you understand them and so they can find you using search engines.

Start with the Tasks and Goals of Your Potential Audiences

Your audience is the group of people whom your website serves. It is often composed of several types of folks, a mixture of people you have not met (potential customers) and those you know well (such as current employees).

Potential customers coming to your website at different stages in the sales cycle have different information needs. Those in the information search stage are looking for more general information about the problem they're trying to solve, whereas those in evaluation of alternatives may be looking for different vendors who offer specific solutions to their problem.

So, to continue the puppy-training example, information searchers are looking for ways to solve particular issues (puppies that jump up, puppies that don't listen, or puppies that growl at certain family members). Other website visitors in the evaluation of alternatives section are more solution focused; they know they need puppy training, and they are seeking to determine the pros and cons of different puppy training programs and vendors, such as cost and location.

Table 5.1 describes the goals and tasks of potential customers, organized by the stages of the sales cycle.

Sales Cycle Category	Goal	Tasks They Might Perform on Your Website
Table 5.1 Goals and Tasks of Potential Customers, Ordered from Early to Late in the Sales		
Need recognition	Articulate what will help them solve a particular problem.	Off the website.
Information Search	Research the problem itself, see what others have done in their situation. Identify whether a solution to their problem exists.	See if your product/service solves their problem.
Evaluation of Alternatives	Gather information to make an informed decision.	Learn more through watching a video demo.
		Request a brochure or download explaining more details.
		Contact a sales representative with a few questions via phone or live chat.
		Consult your location to see if you are within driving distance (for a service business).
		Submit an online lead form or quote request to get pricing information if it is not available on the website.
		Evaluate your product/service relative to competition by
		• Comparing features • Reading reviews or testimonials
Purchase Decision	Choose which solution.	Purchase online.
		Submit an online lead form or quote request.
		Email a sales representative.
		Call a sales representative using a number from the website.

Other Important Audiences

In addition to the potential customer, your website serves other noncustomer audiences, such as investors, job candidates, members of the press, and so forth. Ignoring these types of audiences can haunt you at the end of a web design project. A hidden stakeholder may appear and demand respect for one of these.

Including them is perfectly fine, as is prioritizing them low on the list. Just take them into account early in the project to avoid surprises later.

Table 5.2 roughly lists these categories. For each of these groups, you want to list out what you already know about your audience and organize it in a meaningful way. Think of what each group of website visitors is trying to do and how they might end up on your website to complete their task.

Table 5.2 Audiences, Goals, and Tasks

Audience	Goal	Tasks They Might Perform on Your Website
Potential customers	See Table 5.1.	See Table 5.1.
Such a diverse and important group that it deserves its own table.		
Current customers	Get the most from their product/service.	Submit a support ticket.
		Look up your hours of operation, phone number, fax number, physical address, or an email address of an employee.
		Be assured you are keeping up with the competition so they have no qualms at renewal time.
		Learn of complementary services you offer. Sign up for a user conference or webinar.
Investors	Keep an eye on the company financials.	Access financial performance information.
		Evaluate your product/service offering against that of a competitor.
Job candidates	Find a job with a great company.	Search through current job listings.
		Submit and track a job application.
		Learn more about the company and its future.
		Learn more about current staff.
		Share a current job listing with another job seeker, or perhaps their spouse or family.
Company staff	Do a great job, quickly.	Locate up-to-date marketing materials, such as a whitepaper, to email to a sales prospect.
		Send a friend a job posting.
		Research a new job within the company.
		Keep current on company news.
		Check whether website copy is up-to-date.

The next step is to prioritize your audiences, to define your target. The highest priority audience for most lead-generation or e-commerce websites is potential customers. The website is an online welcome mat to the store or warehouse, a way to start a new relationship.

Other audiences' needs may be served on the website, but the primary real estate of the home page is devoted to helping customers find products or services they need. Investors, job candidates, and employees might have a small portion of home page real estate, and they might merit website sections of their own, linked from the home page, but the website's main task is to attract and build the trust of potential customers.

Make your own list, and use this process to brainstorm information you need on your website, ranging from

- Specifics on the problem your organization (or its product or service) solves

- Specifics on your solution

- Calls to action to engage visitors

- Contact details

- Information about your offline storefronts or offices

- Information for investors, employees, and applicants

Having the information your visitors seek in mind, you'll be able to craft appropriate calls to action and create navigation elements with enough "information scent" to help visitors find what they seek. As you plan your content to address these diverse goals on your website, consider how these groups will find your website in the first place.

Listen to and Watch Your Audience

After you sketch out the possibilities, flesh out your understanding of your audiences by spending time with people who fit these categories. Spend time with individuals, either one on one or two on one (with two representatives from your team, one interviewer and one person taking notes).

For this type of work, we don't recommend a focus group or survey, because these methods aggregate information, and what you're looking for are individual stories and personal characteristics. Watch real people use your current website or a competitor's website. Then you use your observations to create multiple detailed user "personas" to represent the different kinds of people that visit your website. When you have a snapshot in mind of your future customer types with detailed demographics, it facilitates clear communication across the team and focuses your web redesign efforts.

As examples, we've shared some sample interview questions we have used, anonymized to be for the e-commerce puppy accessories store on the PupMed website. Take these questions and adapt them for your own situation. Go find a couple of folks who fit each of the highest-priority audience categories and offer them a $50 gift certificate for their time.

Ask them directly how they make decisions about online purchases, and then, because people are not always good at telling you how they really act, observe people researching your product or service on your website or a competitor's website. What follows are sample interview questions and observations for an e-commerce puppy accessories website, but most of these questions would apply to a lead-generation website.

Don't forget: You should work with your company's legal team to create or adapt an informed consent agreement for all your interview and observation participants. Many university websites post their research-based informed consent agreements. If you're not sure where to start, you might look to one of them as a model.

Puppy Accessories Interview Questions: An Example

Objectives: To learn about the participants' goals for purchasing puppy accessories (toys, leashes, and training tools) and the participants' purchasing process.

Interview Questions

- Why do you need to purchase puppy accessories?

- How do you know that you need to purchase puppy items?

- How far in advance do you actually buy puppy accessories, in relation to when you plan to use them?

- Do you purchase them for yourself or for others?

- Do you buy more than one type of puppy item at the same time?

- If so, why did you purchase more than one type?

- What puppy toys have you or would you purchase?

- Approximately how much do you spend on puppy accessories per year?

- Do you shop around and compare prices?

- Where have you gone to purchase puppy accessories?

- Why did you choose the PupMed website (if applicable)?

- What is the most important factor in determining where to purchase puppy accessories?

Purchasing Puppy Accessories Observation Scenario: An Example

Gathering context and information through observing people interacting with your websites or similar websites can be done in person in a usability lab, at the interviewee's location, or remotely using web conference software.

Budget at least an hour for this activity (or even better, 90 minutes) to give yourself and the participant time to become comfortable with the observation logistics. Otherwise, you might lose some of your precious observation time to learning how the web conferencing software does or does not work for this particular participant!

Look at PupMed Interface Together

Ensure that we touch on

- Role of item price

- Role of shipping price

- Role of delivery time

- How did the user want to complete the transaction? Phone? Online?

Let the Participant Control the Scenario

At this stage, we ask the participant whether he or she could search for a puppy accessory that he or she has bought in the past or would conceivably purchase. We then turn our attention to a computer with the participant "piloting."

"Can you think of a puppy accessory that you have purchased in the past or one that you may need to purchase sometime soon? We'd like to have you search for it online."

- Please go to the search engine that you prefer when you need to find information or are shopping for something.

- Please search for the item that you have in mind.

If the user's search brings up PupMed in the search results, ask the participant to click either the link in organic search results (preferred) or the paid search ad.

If the user's search does *not* bring up PupMed, note what the user searched for and ask him or her to tell us about the search if it does not correspond to a title or publisher.

Then, go on to ask the following:

- We'd like get feedback on the PupMed website. Could you go to www.example.com?

- Now that we're here, could you try searching for your item here?

Review Specific Pages

Last, we gather feedback from two specific pages from our website.

Item Category Page

- Tell us about this page. What do you see?

- Is the item that you want on this page?

- Tell us about the search box in the middle of the page

- Is there any additional information that you would have liked to have seen on this page?

- What would you do next?

Item Description Page

- Tell us about this page. What do you see?

- Would you buy an accessory at this point?

- Tell us about the items on the page.

- Is there any additional information that you would have liked to have seen on this page?

Develop Website Personas

Described by Alan Cooper in his book *The Inmates are Running the Asylum*, user personas are sketches of individual fictional people used during the design process. These personas are members of target audience categories. Personas serve two purposes: They are a tool for team communication and an input into the design process.

As a communication tool, they exist to make the target user more concrete during design discussions. They allow the design team to "get on the same page" as to what the target user is like, through empathy instead of designing based on personal preferences. They also tap into our ability as humans to empathize with others.

For this reason, personas have seemingly extraneous personal details and a portrait, which should be a photograph, not a cartoon. As humans, we respond strongly to faces; it's hard wired in our psyche. It's easier to dismiss the needs of an unknown faceless website visitor than it is to disregard the needs of a character that has been described in detail and has a familiar face.

Without the personas, the design team often unconsciously designs in terms of their own needs and goals. This phenomenon is known as the *mirror persona*. We all tend to design for users like ourselves, the one in the mirror, in the absence of an actual

user. But, the folks who run businesses and make websites may not represent the audience for the website, and this might decrease the website's success. Personas remove this problem, providing a tangible (yet fictional) person to focus on, instead.

WEBSITE PERSONAS IN PRACTICE: AN EXAMPLE

"I wonder whether this page is getting too complicated. What do you think, Maria?"

"Well, let's go back to our user personas. We said that some users, like our Sam persona here, will be reading this page at work, perhaps on their lunch hour, so someone like that might be distracted. Other users, like the Nicole persona, are probably online at home after the kids are in bed… which could mean she'd be tired. Yes, I think you're right, it's getting a little busy on this page for a lot of our users, given their time or energy constraints."

Personas are more than facts—they are stories. They are not a deliverable to get out of the way before moving on, they are something that you live with throughout the project. Most important, personas don't solve any problems just because they exist. They only really work if they become an integral part of how you talk and even think about a website project.

After the user personas are complete, the design team should be able to tell the story of how the users would complete tasks using the website. These task-based stories are called scenarios, and ultimately, after being fleshed out, become diagrams showing the users' various task paths through the website.

Personas can support a "cognitive walkthrough" of the website's design, but also complement aggregate user data found in analytics packages such as Google Analytics. The combination of the specific user needs and the larger quantitative patterns provides deeper insight than either method provides on its own.

Persona and Scenario Development Process

Developing each persona is a five-step process:

1. Determine the target audiences. This prioritization is primarily the work of your business team. For a website focused on lead generation or e-commerce, the highest-priority audience and persona should be a potential customer or a buyer, with other people and actions on the website taking a distant second place.

2. Interview people who fit the target demographic and learn about their needs and the process they use to make decisions when completing a specific task supported by your website.

3. Describe the personas and define the specific goal that drives each persona's visit to the website. Which motivations must the persona fulfill to have a satisfying experience with your company? How do they think about this problem? How would they solve it? What do they think they need?

4. Describe the task. The task is the activity that brings the persona to your website, either directly or indirectly. What do they need to complete their task on the website? List specific conditions that the persona must meet to feel successful at completing the task.

5. Repeat steps 2–4 for other tasks and other audiences for your website.

Sample Personas

Let's look at a couple of sample personas we developed for Attendance on Demand, Inc., a vendor of time and attendance systems. Attendance on Demand, Inc.'s results from web design using these personas are covered in the case study at the end of this section.

Persona 1: Paul Stackhouse

Figure 5.1 shows Paul Stackhouse, the persona representing someone shopping for a replacement product.

Figure 5.1 *Paul Stackhouse, a fictional persona.*

Age: 54

Job Title: Production Manager for Plastica North America

Personal Background: Paul has been involved in plastics manufacturing since 1990. He went back to school to get a Bachelor degree in Industrial Management and was promoted to Production Manager of the Plastica North America film production plant. He is married, has three kids, and he has lived in Connecticut all his life.

Goals: Plastica emphasizes analytics in its operational goals, and as a result Paul is expected to help provide clear reporting as part of the integrated management team. He provides information for planning and scheduling production and maintenance efforts.

Paul is directly responsible for meeting production requirements, and his performance assessment is directly tied to technical and cost-saving improvement activities. Because Plastica's production line produces high numbers of short-run, diverse products that require the production shifts to quickly retool and reorganize production operations, this can be challenging to track and improve. Paul wants to identify the level of effort for retooling, and to identify which processes best help his teams during the retooling efforts.

Scenario: Currently, Paul is using a competitor software product to manage his workforce and generate reports, but he finds it confusing and often cannot configure it properly. Because he is charged with creating tools to better do his assigned duties, he searches for time and attendance software and finds the Attendance on Demand, Inc. website.

Paul is particularly interested in reporting and configurability for production environments. He is intrigued by the possibility that he could acquire a web-based software as a service tool without having to battle with the IT department for additional support or resources, and wants to get a demonstration of the product's value for his particular industry.

Requirements: Website must clearly describe the ease for reporting of workforce information for production managers:

- Tool must handle issues such as absenteeism, overtime, and idle workforce overhead time during retooling efforts.

- Website must include a clear cost/benefit description of hosted time and attendance solutions.

Persona 2: Carla Crowther

Figure 5.2 shows Carla Crowther, the persona representing someone in the initial product research stage of the sales cycle.

Figure 5.2 *Carla Crowther, another fictional website persona.*

Age: 37

Job Title: Payroll/HR Manager for Perla Corporation

Background: Carla is a CPA who discovered an aptitude for "softer" HR-related activities while working at an elementary school in her 20s. She took a job as a CPA and HR manager at Perla 4 years ago. She is single, and she lives in metro Detroit.

Goal: Carla provides overall leadership in the administration of Perla Division's multistate weekly and monthly payroll. She coordinates the efforts of department personnel, ensuring continuity, integrity, and confidentiality. She also coordinates with all of Perla Corporation's operation personnel to provide accurate and timely data in the most efficient manner.

Carla has seen the company try to integrate its workforce management and payroll systems twice previously, without success. Carla has a good reputation as a thoughtful member of her team, and her perspective will be highly regarded during the decision-making process.

Scenario: The chief financial officer (CFO) and chief operations officer (COO) decided to get input from their team this time around, so she has been tasked to find recommendations for an integrated workforce management solution that does

not require them to stop using their current payroll system, but will allow them to enjoy better benefits reporting with an accrual feature for their production and sales staff. Carla comes to the website to identify the integration and reporting capabilities of the Attendance on Demand service.

She knows that the company is still 6 months away from making a decision, but she is intrigued by the hosted solution of Attendance on Demand, Inc. and wants to be able to share the information with her CFO, who also manages the IT resources of the company.

Requirements: Website must clearly describe the integration and reporting capabilities:

- Descriptions of front-loaded automated processes to reduce the month-end reporting and payroll resource crunch

- Descriptions of the reporting and integration capabilities of the Attendance on Demand system

Adapt Your Website to Your Personas' Needs

Now that you've characterized your website visitors and their needs, use this information when planning your website and negotiating with other stakeholders on website content, layout, and functionality.

Next Steps: Gather More Feedback

After you identify your target website visitors or personas (most websites have more than one), there are a variety of usability techniques and data sources to gather data and prepare recommendations for increasing your website's usability and conversion rates, explored in "Beyond Best Practices: User Research" in Chapter 7, "Making Websites That Work."

A website that answers visitors' questions and addresses their needs increases conversion rates and therefore your revenue. Gathering and organizing as much knowledge as you can about the different users of your website helps you address your customers in a way that satisfies their needs. By now you probably realize that knowing your audience is an integral part of your success!

Consider Their Path to Your Content

A good portion of your website traffic comes through search engines, though some of that search engine traffic is simply navigational. Over the past few years, direct visitors to websites (visitors who come through typing in the URL into the browser

address bar or through a bookmark in their browser) have declined. People seem to have stopped maintaining lists of websites in their browser bookmarks to get back to websites they value. Instead, they just type brand names and even whole URLs into search engines to get to the website they're seeking quickly.

So, being found in search engines is important for both new customers and existing relationships. Folks may take other routes to your website, as well, such as through email or a link from another website. Table 5.3 lists how different audiences might arrive at your website. You might want to draw your own table for your audiences.

Table 5.3 Audiences and Potential Paths

Audience	How They Might Come to Your Website
Potential new customers, information search stage	Click through organic search listing or paid search ad on keywords describing their problem or needed service. *Examples for a nonprofit: Hungry in Poughkeepsie, pancreatic cancer, how to make my store more secure.*
Potential new customers, evaluate alternatives stage	Click through organic search listing or paid search ad on keywords describing their anticipated solution.
Potential new customers, purchase decision stage	Click through organic search listing or paid search ad on keywords describing their problem or needed service. *Examples: The name of a specific prescription medicine, 1.375 AR Level II Bullet Resistant Acrylic.*
Customers	Click through an organic or paid search listing on keywords, such as your brand name or URL.
Investors or donors	Click through an organic or paid search listing on keywords, such as your brand name or URL.
Job candidates	Click through an organic or paid search listing on keywords, such as your brand name, your URL, or general career/jobs keywords. *Examples:* *For a nonprofit: Volunteer in Ann Arbor, nonprofit jobs in Chicago.* *For a corporation: Jobs at Pharmotron, pharmaceutical jobs.*
Company staff	Click through an organic or paid search listing on keywords, such as your brand name or URL.

Links from other websites (for example, links from Twitter or Facebook) will influence your audiences, too, by showing up in organic search engine results and on their own merits.

Table 5.4 presents several scenarios of folks clicking through to your website from another website. These might be online press releases, social media sites like Facebook or Twitter, directory listings such as a list of members of a local Chamber of Commerce, or online reviews.

Table 5.4 Routes to Your Website from Social Media or Other Websites

Audience	How They Might Come to Your Website
Potential new customers, information search stage	Reading an online article on the problem that mentions your organization.
	A recommendation from a Twitter or Facebook friend with a similar business or personal issue.
Potential new customers, evaluate alternatives stage	Reading a review article.
	A link from a corporate Twitter account.
	A note from a happy customer on Twitter.
	A customer service mishap that got some publicity on a website like www.pissedcustomer.com.
	A Facebook promotion or post.
Potential new customers, purchase decision stage	Reading stories people have posted online about your company and examine your responses (or lack thereof).
	Reading tweets mentioning your company and evaluating sentiment (positive or negative).
	Reading Google Places reviews.
Customers	Newsletter or promo to existing customers.
	Click through an email from an employee.
	Via a Twitter or Facebook conversation with a customer service representative.
Investors or donors	Investment website, company press release.
Job candidates	Jobs listing website or online press release website.

Prepare your website to attract new customers and be found by folks who know you already through search engine optimization (SEO).

Case Study: Persona-Driven Redesign

Attendance on Demand, Inc. helps businesses manage time tracking, scheduling, and leave for their employees. Attendance on Demand, Inc. relies on its website for attracting prospects and communicating with existing customers. With a website full of valuable information and lots of online traffic, there were inexplicably few new leads. Conversion rates languished at less than half a percent. Why?

The project team measured visitor behavior using Google Analytics, benchmarked key website features against competitors, and gathered qualitative data through interviews. The team compiled the insights gained from interviews into two key personas and associated scenarios. Using the personas, the market description, and an assessment of Attendance on Demand Inc.'s competition, the team identified the four key aspects of the website that should be improved and how the architecture and layout could address this.

The new website design needed to focus on

- Communicating to new customers the value of the Attendance on Demand product and why they need it.

- Introducing users to the system and service and showing how their complex workforce management needs are met by Attendance on Demand.

- Addressing credibility issues up front. Potential customers needed to know more about Attendance on Demand, Inc. as a company. Credibility is an important issue for hosted web solutions, so the website needed to include enough information to allow users to know the organization better.

- Encouraging visitors to start the conversation about hosted time and attendance solutions, regardless of what stage of the sales cycle the visitor is in.

The team created a wireframe, a rough layout of the website, to focus calls to action and relay information to support these specific needs. When the new website design launched in early April, 2008, the results were immediate and dramatic, as shown in Figure 5.3. Conversion rates jumped from less than half a percent to 1.31%, quadrupling lead generation.
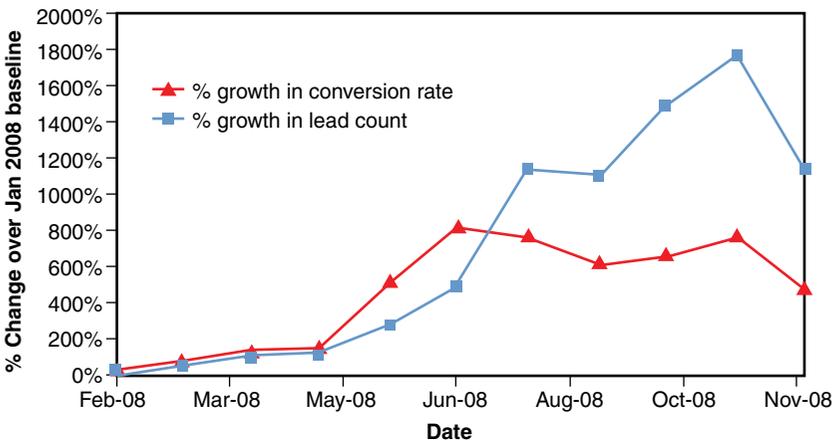

Figure 5.3 *Growth in lead-conversion rate and lead count by month, from Google Analytics.*

For more information about Google Analytics and other analytical tools, see "Web Analytics: Information Rich Dashboard" in Chapter 4, "Breaking Down Silos to Get the Metrics You Need."

Speak Your Audience's Language: The Real SEO

The best way to establish rapport is to reflect that you've heard the other person. In conversation, this is known as *active listening* and often involves repeating back, in your own words or theirs, what the other person said to demonstrate your attention and understanding.

Well, SEO is the same thing. SEO involves making sure the web copy you write is successful because it uses the important terms and phrases on which your audience, your personas, are searching. And, because they recognize a little of themselves in your web copy, and because your website copy will be crafted specifically to support them in their decision process (reflecting their goals and tasks from Tables 5.1 and 5.2), website visitors may deem your website to be more persuasive and effective.

Bear in mind the words your target audience uses to describe your services. If your website uses words to describe your services that are different from those that people use when searching, those searchers won't find your website, and they may end up being directed to the website of a competitor.

Do Your Keyword Research

When identifying potential keywords and keyphrases, make sure you are reflecting your target audience's language. Do they use different keywords to describe your products than you use internally or in your industry? Quite likely. Writing for your audience means using their language, *not yours*. And, what's amazing is you can find out just what they're saying by asking the search engines. Search engines capture, store, and let you query information about what people are looking for, in their own words. What a treasure trove!

Start by generating a long list of options: brainstorm industry-related keywords, get a list of related websites in your industry and then harvest words from those websites, and then use a keyphrase research tool to expand this list to additional, related keywords.

Web Writing Term Evaluation: An Example

Let's assume you want to investigate web writing keywords. All you have to do is ask Google to show you what search keywords people are using, and you'll get guidance on how to speak to your audience and how to help them find you all at the same time.

Figure 5.4 shows that in 2009, the keyphrase "writing for the web" has been eclipsed by popularity of searches for "SEO writing." The data points shown here are the average search volume for each year extracted from worldwide searches available from Google Insights for Search.
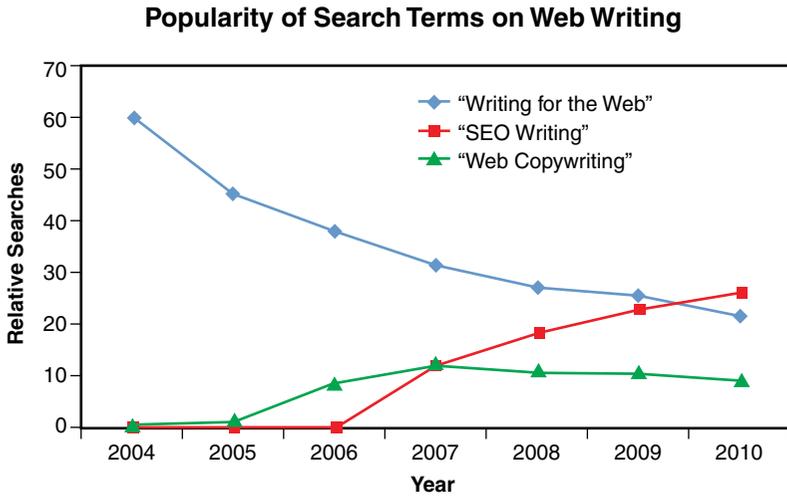

Figure 5.4 *Relative popularity of searches on web writing.*

But, comparing sets of keywords in small groups on a visual tool like Google Insights for Search is limiting. You should go to a more data intensive keyphrase generation tool to characterize the larger landscape of words that describe your products and services, your word market.

🔍 *Tip*

You can access Google Insights for Search at www.google.com/insights/ search. This tool lets you review and compare search volume patterns across specific regions, categories, or time frames.

Evaluate Your Keyphrases in the Context of the Entire Word Market

A *word market* is the collection of keywords and keyphrases that people use when searching for products or services. An optimized website shows up for high-traffic words from its word market.

Optimizing a website for important keywords in the relevant word market creates two advantages. Traffic to the website increases due to higher search engine page rankings. More important, the traffic generated brings in better qualified visitors

who are more likely to be interested in your products and services. Because of this, make sure you start your SEO work grounded firmly in research on what keywords your potential customers are using in conversation or when searching.

After identifying the word market itself, you need to determine the best keywords to use on a website, how much traffic those keywords can bring to a website, and how difficult it would be to become well ranked in them.

Word Market Analysis Process: List Generation and Evaluation

Begin by creating a list of keywords and keyphrases related to your products, services, and organization. You can scour your website for examples, and you may want to review competitor websites to see other language describing these things. You want to supplement your list by using tools such as Google's Keyword Tool to expand that list of keywords.

A cross section of keyword tools includes the following:

- Google AdWords Keyword Tool (free) (https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal)
- Paid programs such as
  - WordTracker(www.wordtracker.com/)
  - Trellian Keyword Discovery (www.keyworddiscovery.com/)
  - SEO Book's keyword tool (http://tools.seobook.com/keyword-tools/seobook/)
  - WordStream(www.wordstream.com/)

These tools enable you to start with a few phrases and provide longer lists of suggested keywords and supporting data from which to choose. A key criterion here is the average traffic on these keywords. However, more is not always better if the keyword fits other websites better than yours. (For instance, if you sell soup, the keyword "food" is relevant but not specific enough.)

Assess Your Keywords and Traffic

Next, assess both your competitors and the traffic for each keyword and website. With these insights, you can filter the list to only the most relevant keywords.

To categorize the keywords:

1. Group together those phrases that indicate a search for similar information.
2. Check the search results pages for all phrases and filter the categories, removing any category with search results entirely outside of your competitive market.

3. Assess the keyphrases within each remaining category to determine which are ideal targets.

Make Your Final Keyword Choices

To complete the keyword assessment, choose the words that have the best chance of success. You want to target the highest traffic keyphrases where you have a relatively strong chance of ranking. The challenge here is assessing the relative likelihood of getting good rankings. Your assessment of the "likelihood" is always relative to other websites and other phrases in your word market:

1. Determine the number of commercial type websites in the first page of search results. If the results are overwhelmingly reference websites, industry resources, and news publications, then there are fewer opportunities for a commercial website to rank.

2. Are the results mostly for websites that show up all over your word market? If so, those websites are likely highly competitive SEO wise, and this term is likely highly competitive.

3. Spot check some of the top results for basic SEO implementation as described in Chapter 7, in the "Define Your Market" section. If your competition on those terms is unsophisticated SEO-wise, ranking is easier here than against folks who have taken care of the basics and more.

Deciding What *Not* to Target

What you'll find, after reviewing competitor websites and keyphrases, is that some keyphrases have a better chance of success than others, both in terms of the total traffic and the chance of improving search engine rankings.

Obviously, to get the most return on your investment in website infrastructure (see the section "Crawler Control: Speak to Your Spiders" in Chapter 7) and website copywriting, you want to optimize your website for the keyphrases that have the most potential for success.

There may be other reasons to abandon a keyphrase as a potential SEO target, such as the following:

- **Single word:** Given the nature of SEO tactics, it's difficult to intentionally target single-word keyphrases. It's better to target two- or three-word phrases instead. Sometimes, a website increases ranking on the single-word keyphrase as a result of these efforts, but it is impossible to predict.

- **Informational resource prominence:** Search engines seem to treat informational resources differently than commercial websites. When informational resources dominate the search results, this indicates that the search engines have determined the query is typically noncommercial in nature.

In such cases, it is inordinately difficult for commercial websites to appear; and even if they do, they appear with a low ranking, below the fold.

- **High competition:** Attempting to target a large number of competitive keyphrases in your SEO strategy is highly resource intensive and expensive, and often provides only modest results (for example, below the fold, second page visibility, or worse... no results at all). Instead, try prioritizing the highly competitive keyphrases, and targeting a few top candidates. Based on the success of these, you can plan on targeting additional keyphrases (or not) in the future.

Case Study: Word Market Focuses Tutor Time on the Right Descriptors

In 2007, Tutor Time, a national provider of early childhood education and childcare, undertook a review of their appearance on keywords in their field. Until that time, their marketing copy had focused on keyphrases such as "childcare" and "learning center," and they were positioning their centers as schools. They had good visibility online for searches that included these keywords, and little visibility on phrases that included the keyword "day care" or "daycare;" see Table 5.5.

The brand was visible on a few daycare keyphrases (for instance, "toddler daycare," "learning center daycare"), but not general unmodified daycare keywords that were more common. The company had been intentionally omitting the phrase "daycare" from their marketing materials, in an effort to distinguish themselves from other daycare companies (that is, to let parents know that they offered more).

Table 5.5 Search Engine Rankings for Tutor Time in Summer 2007

Keyphrase	Rank
Childcare learning center	2
Preschool learning center	2
Childcare learning centers	3
Toddler childcare	3
Childcare centers	4
Preschool learning centers	4
Private kindergarten programs	4
Child learning centers	4
Learning center daycare	5
Toddler education	5
Child learning centers	5

Yet, the data showed that search engine visitors were using keyphrases such as "day-care" more often than "childcare" and much more often than "early childhood education." Competing brands had better visibility than Tutor Time did on the daycare keyphrases. And, when a searcher for "daycare" landed on the Tutor Time website, they had a higher conversion rate than "childcare" searchers.

"Daycare" keywords also had higher traffic and generated leads for Tutor Time schools at a higher rate than "childcare" keywords. So although Tutor Time offered more than just daycare, people used that familiar term when searching.

After 2007, when Tutor Time committed to including "daycare" keyphrases on their website, visits from these popular organic searches increased year over year, shown in Figure 5.5. The resulting jump in website visits for 2008 through 2010 was extracted from Tutor Time's Google Analytics. (The searches on "daycare" keywords declined somewhat in 2010 due to economic factors.)
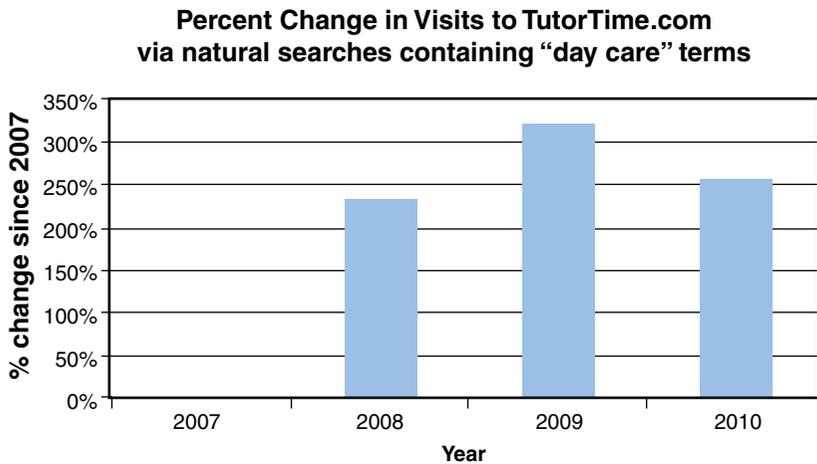
Percent Change in Visits to TutorTime.com via natural searches containing "day care" terms

Figure 5.5 *The percentage change in visits data comparing the number of visits to 2007.*

Summary

A simple, easy-to-use website is not easy to build. It involves making real tradeoffs, choosing a target audience and a message and focusing on that, instead of trying to satisfy everyone. Do the hard work of making design and language choices so your website visitors don't have to.

Making it easy for your visitors takes time. It involves learning from mistakes and a passion for listening, listening to the website analytics patterns and listening to the voices of the target audiences. This investment is worth the effort, saving waste and rework later, sparing your team and your website visitor from content that misses its target audience or is past its due date.

Ensure the success of your website by making it all about your target audience's needs:

- Analyze your audiences:

  - Develop personas and scenarios of use.

  - Keep these personas and scenarios in mind when writing web copy and to vet any proposed design and functionality changes.

  - Watch real users use your website to make refinements.

- Speak your audience's language so that they feel understood and can find you using search engines.

- Research the important terms in your word market.

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