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Dave McClure • Nov. 30, 2014

It's a sign of the sad state of accounting firm web sites that in 18 years of competition, none have ever won a Webby award for site design. Some financial and banking sites

have won, and even the Arizona Society of CPAs was an honoree in 2006. But no

The accounting web site of the 21st Century is an interesting, dynamic, content-environment that draws in prospects, informs existing clients, keeps pace with an ever-changing regulatory environment, offers solutions to problems clients do not even know they have, and puts the firm on the short list of accountants a business will call when they need help and advice.

At least, that's the theory. In practice, the state of the accounting web site is much bleaker than that. Not that accounting firm web sites have not improved dramatically, but rather with the growth of other social media – Linked-In, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest et al – web sites have become the first-generation marketing tool everyone forgot about. In fact, accounting firms with a robust social media program have long since gotten rid of their "webmaster" position. Or contracted it out to their Internet Service Provider.

Which explains why accounting web sites continue to make the same deadly design mistakes today that have rendered them ineffective in years past. You don't have to stop at the 10 top mistakes – web designers can cite more than a hundred. But we have to draw the line somewhere, and if you were to avoid just these 10 you would have made major progress toward reviving what should serve as the foundation of your online marketing presence.

Here's my list:

1. **What business am I in?** Professional firms are delighted to tell you about their reputation, the quality of their people, the ethics of their founder and the glowing praise they have won. What they fail to do is put a simple, 200-word description of what they do. This should be on the first page of the site, repeated on the "about" or "history page."

2. **Disabling the "Back" button.** How clever is this? By disabling this button in the

administrative people – need to have their capabilities listed. Hire a photographer to take good staff pictures, and update them every five years.

5. **Broken links.** Few things will irritate a visitor more than the dreaded Error 404 – Page not found. It's easy to have someone check the site to make sure that none are broken, just to avoid the aggravation.

6. **Cleverly hiding the firm's contact information.** In the panic to avoid spam and viruses, firms deleted their contact information from the web site years ago, replacing this vital information with a long, invasive email form few will bother to fill out. Here's the rule – the name, address, phone number and a generic email address should be listed at the bottom of every single page of the site. Then get a good email filter to protect that address.

7. **"Canned" layout and design.** You can actually get a web site design for free – from any number of places. The problem is that a thousand other firms are using the same design, and none of them look any better than your site. Invest in a design suited to your firm and it capabilities. The worst offense is to present a one-page "business card" web site – or none at all.

8. **Installing Java Script.** A decade ago it was a technology that seemed destined to rule the online world. Today, it is the source of never-ending security holes and patches, placing the firm's site and clients at risk. Get rid of it – if Java is required, there is a design flaw in the site.

9. **Automatic audio files.** There is nothing worse than going to a web site only to have a video or advertisement blare across the office. Visitors should have the right to choose whether to suffer through your audio or video message. Force them to do so, and they will flee.

0. **Typos and grammatical errors.** My editors will gleefully attest to the fact that I am a dreadfully bad proofreader. But that is not my job, or that of the firm's partner, either. Have the site scanned for typos and grammatical errors every month – and buy lunch for anyone who finds one. They will have earned it.

The firm's web site is the cornerstone of the online media strategy, and cannot be

Internet Site of the Month. **Web Site Tool Tester (http://www.websitetooltester.com/en/website-builder-reviews/).** There are both too few and too many sites dedicated to building and testing web sites for accounting firms. This site reviews 10 tools for testing a site, along with a book of ideas, and while it may not be perfect it is a starting place.

[Thumbs Up] – **CPA Pract Advisor Web Building Tools (https://www.cpapracticeadvisor.com/collection/11600550/2014-review-of-website-builders-and-tools-for-accounting-firms).** Not to tout our own magazine, but CPAPA does an annual review of website builders designed for use by accounting firms. All the usual caveats apply, but the 2014 review by John Higgins is worth reading.

[Thumbs Down] – **Cheap document scanners.** The market is suddenly awash with cheap document scanners of every description – not Fujitsu, or Cannon, or new entrants like Ambir, but rather knock-off brands that are cheaper but have high failure rates and misfeeds. This might not be critical in reading business cards, but you don't want to be laying in the emergency room while they struggle with admission forms on a cheap scanner. Quality counts.

[Thumbs Sideways] – **Small Footprint Computers.** A new generation of micro-computers (mini-ITX form factor) computers is hitting the marketplace, driven by the need for flexibility and power in the same box. They need lots of cooling, but are very suitable for graphics, home theater, and light-duty applications like scanning support.

[Thumbs Down] – **Apple's iWatch.** Is the third time the charm for this ultimate geek gadget? Only if you are too young to remember the first two times a data watch has been proclaimed the latest and greatest technology. Anyone else here remember the Timex data watch? You can bet Microsoft does, which may be why they are a little

more cautious about this bandwagon. I personally would not be caught dead

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