

# 20 ways to a better website

PLUS meet our  
2009 SmartCompany  
Web Award winners

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## INTRODUCTION

If you think your website is humming along quite nicely, it might be time to think again - the inaugural SmartCompany Web Awards highlight exactly what you're up against.

We decided to launch the awards after two years of judging the best website category of the Smart50. The entries were, to put it kindly, fairly unimpressive and we were determined to show our community just how good small business websites could be.

The Web Awards certainly do that. We had more than 200 entries, and we were extremely thankful that we could call on a crack team of internet experts - including Webfirm's Andrew Dalton, ProBlogger Darren Rowse, Deloitte Digital's Peter Williams and Red Balloon's Naomi Simson - to help us pick the winners.

One of the key themes that emerged from judging the Web Awards was that the majority of the entrants spent under \$10,000 for their site, with many opting to use open-source software.

This is great news for SMEs, showing it is possible to compete with big businesses that have considerably larger budgets. So when it comes to great websites, it's clear it's not how much money you spend but how you spend it.

We hope you get some great inspiration from our award winners.

**James Thomson**  
Editor, SmartCompany



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The advertisement features a yellow Webfirm helicopter flying over a dark world map. The helicopter has 'WEBFIRM' written on its side and a red and white striped tail. A searchlight beam from the helicopter illuminates the text 'Google' and 'Yahoo!' on the map. The Webfirm logo is in the top left corner.

## TIP 1:

### MAP THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Make the investment in time to build a site map, and then use this to systematically outline the expected look/functionality of each page or section. The benefits of this are that you will have a clear plan of what will be built and the developer will be better placed to have all of the details of what is expected from the beginning of the project.

And remember - just make a start. Have an unequivocal belief that your idea has great value and understand that if you don't bring your proposal to the market, somebody else probably will.

- Peter Sobels, RiskInfo ([www.riskinfo.com.au](http://www.riskinfo.com.au))

## TIP 2:

### THE POWER OF REFERRALS

Never engage a web development company without a recommendation from someone you trust, someone who has actually used them to build their website. Check their portfolio if they have not built sites similar to yours, as chances are they will not be able to come up with goods. And if a web development company says they will take six weeks to build your website then in your mind add on another two weeks, but don't tell them this.

- Ann Nolan, Babysitter Directory ([www.babysitterdirectory.com.au](http://www.babysitterdirectory.com.au))

## TIP 3:

### IT'S YOUR PROJECT

Don't rely on the developers to manage the project - make sure that you keep a close eye on costs and timescales. Keep in touch, communicate and have regular reviews.

- Andy Henderson, SpaceOut ([www.spaceout.com.au](http://www.spaceout.com.au))

## TIP 4:

### PLAN, PLAN, PLAN

It's all too easy for visual thinkers to start on a website redevelopment project too early - eager to see how attractive their new site could be - only to hit hurdles when it comes time to place content or to determine the true focus of the site.

Having a clear idea of what purpose the site is to fulfill, how it should go about fulfilling that purpose and how its success will be measured is essential before a line of code is written or a pixel is illustrated.

- Joshua Smith, IP Online ([www.ionline.com.au](http://www.ionline.com.au))

## TIP 5:

### AHEAD WITH OFF THE SHELF

I would definitely recommend using an off the shelf CMS if you are a small company like us. Having the technology ready to be configured to your needs really cuts down development time.

Before you start designing the website have a clear vision of your target audience, what you want them to think, feel and do when visiting your website and the overall image you're after. Regularly check back that you are meeting your aim.

- Aimee Williamson, Kampai ([www.kampai.com.au](http://www.kampai.com.au))

## TIP 6: SOUPED-UP SEO

We have a two-pronged attack focusing on paid and organic search listings. We participate in paid advertising via Google Adwords and Yahoo Paid Search and we also participate in various affiliate schemes and price comparison websites on a commission basis.

In terms of organic search, we conduct regular SEO reviews of content on our site and weekly record search engine rankings for key targeted terms. We run an on-site discussion forum, user generated reviews site and user contributed articles section.

The main purpose of course is to provide more information for customers but it also serves to keep content fresh and dynamic.

- Kate Morris, Adore Beauty ([www.adorebeauty.com.au](http://www.adorebeauty.com.au))

## TIP 7: THE PERFECTION TRAP

The goal should never be perfection before launch, but excellence. Improvements should happen gradually once the core site is up and running. Smaller companies in particular should treat it like a work in progress rather than wanting everything done perfectly from the start.

The limited resources of small businesses mean that perfection before launch will end up becoming very costly. It is advisable to start with excellent core functions and continue building functionality as you go. A lot of the improvements that we have done to our site only became apparent as we grew sales and traffic. Progressive development will help you spend those valuable dollars wisely.

- Wai Hong Fong, Oz Scopes ([www.ozscopes.com.au](http://www.ozscopes.com.au))

## TIP 8: UPDATE URGENCY

Having up-to-date content is king. There is nothing more annoying than sites with a news section that dates back to last year or the year before. So nothing has happened in that company for over 12 months? And I have found this on the website of some of Australia's fastest moving companies.

If you don't have them in-house, get an expert. Crappy sites portray an unprofessional image and it's not good enough in this day and age.

- Peter Cameron, Carbonite Australia ([www.carbonite.com.au](http://www.carbonite.com.au))

## TIP 9: SOCIAL MEDIA TIME MANAGEMENT

Make sure the actual time you spend on your social media does not overtake your other business functions. Social networking can be addictive. Spend a specific time (first thing in the morning, 10 minutes at lunchtime and just before close of business) and then focus on what you need to be doing. Sign out of the sites so they are not front of mind and/or you don't have TweetDeck chirping at you all day reminding you of some interesting tidbits.

- Angela Sands, Angela Sands & Associates ([www.this-is-how-you-write-it.com](http://www.this-is-how-you-write-it.com))

## TIP 10: BREAK DOWN THE BARRIERS

My best design tip is simple. Users over the age of 35 in general find the internet complex and you must minimise barriers. For example, only ask for critical data such as registration at the final point in the cycle.

- Dave Cunningham, OurExplorer Travel ([www.ourexplorer.com](http://www.ourexplorer.com))

## TIP 11:

### THE THREE-WAY RULE

Our guide for Twitter is 3:3:3. One third original marketing material (such as food tips, links to our website and recipes); one third re-tweets of other relevant information supporting our followers and those we are following; and one third replies and conversation.

- Michele Menchin, Taste Gourmet ([www.tastegourmet.com.au](http://www.tastegourmet.com.au))

## TIP 12:

### WOW YOUR CUSTOMER'S WORKMATES

We aim to provide such a standout shopping experience that our customers will want to tell all their friends about us. Most orders are delivered to workplaces so we present our parcels in such a way that the recipient will want to show all their workmates. We provide referral cards in every order, along with a thankyou letter, free samples and a small chocolate.

- Kate Morris, Adore Beauty ([www.adorebeauty.com.au](http://www.adorebeauty.com.au))

## TIP 14:

### PLAYING IT SAFE

Our industry is one that requires a great deal of trust. The website needed to be conservative in feel and use, while ensuring it was up-to-date and visually appealing.

Our target audience is young and modern but the subject matter and look therefore was serious and needed to be safe. It couldn't have too many bells and whistles and the website needed to state 'establishment and trustworthy'. It was about combining the opposing modern IT with conservative values.

- Chris Dawson, Humaneed ([www.humaneed.com.au](http://www.humaneed.com.au))

## TIP 13: IT'S ALIVE!

Think of your website as a living, breathing community of people, not just information. There are a number of key elements to think about. Who is the website aimed at? What is the purpose of the site? Where is the personality of your company in your website? Be clear on your values, vision, mission and your clients. How will the site be maintained? What humans/dollars do you have available for the upkeep and how often does the content need to change?

- Erin McCuskey, Yum Productions ([www.yum.vic.edu.au](http://www.yum.vic.edu.au))

## TIP 15: THE ART OF LISTENING

The key to a great social media strategy is frequency and proximity. Social media has to be used on a daily basis. It behaves differently to traditional media. It's not about telling people stuff. It's about proposing ideas, listening to the answers and then acting on them. We have had more ideas for improvement and innovation from contact with members than we have thought of as a team.

We'd tell any start-up to 'have a conversation' with their members - treat them with respect and as people, not numbers. We think it's important to understand it's the members website, and that we are just the trustees of it.

- Steve Sammartino, Rentoid ([www.rentoid.com](http://www.rentoid.com))



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## TIP 16: EDUCATING THE USER

Our greatest challenge was to introduce and educate our website visitors about our new service, which was entirely foreign to them, in the most efficient and user-friendly way possible. Hence, we added a number of “how to” tutorials to our site in addition to standard help features.

- Gavin Scholes, 1300 Record ([www.1300record.com.au](http://www.1300record.com.au))

## TIP 17: PROTECT YOUR ASSETS

Ensure you own everything. Sometimes you may be unaware that you don't own the design and website itself, and developers never seem to be open and upfront about this - you may find yourself locked into using only them.

Don't hire anyone unless this has been cleared up and contracts signed where you own everything, before you let them commence work for you. It pays to spend on a good contract to ensure the protection of your business, otherwise it can become very costly if you try to do this later.

- Susan Cramer, Australian Bridal Directory ([www.australianbridaldirectory.com.au](http://www.australianbridaldirectory.com.au))

## TIP 18: KEEP BADGERING THOSE DEVELOPERS

Our biggest challenge was keeping the development team on track. Initially they rushed off building what they “thought” we wanted - based on the functional requirements we provided - with very little consultation and discussion. We had to badger them to communicate effectively with us and provide regular reviews.

- Andy Henderson, SpaceOut ([www.spaceout.com.au](http://www.spaceout.com.au))

## TIP 19: PEOPLE POWER

Once you build your site, get in front of your customers or users to see how they react to it. We didn't get it right the first time and it took our capacity to listen to realise we needed to change our strategy. Real people will need to use your website and product, so talk to them and understand why it doesn't work so you can build something people want.

- JP McMullan, ParkSlide ([www.parkslide.com](http://www.parkslide.com))

## TIP 20: OPEN FOR BUSINESS

Remember to always treat your website as your "shopfront". How would you deck out your shopfront to attract the right clients for your business?

When actually trying to work out the structure of your site, always start off with a piece of paper and make a wish list of how many pages and features you would like your site to have. You can always cut them down later or implement them in stages. Work out what is absolutely necessary to go into your site. And always look at it from an end users perspective (not yours).

- Lisa Taliana, Taliana Design ([www.talianadesign.com.au](http://www.talianadesign.com.au))

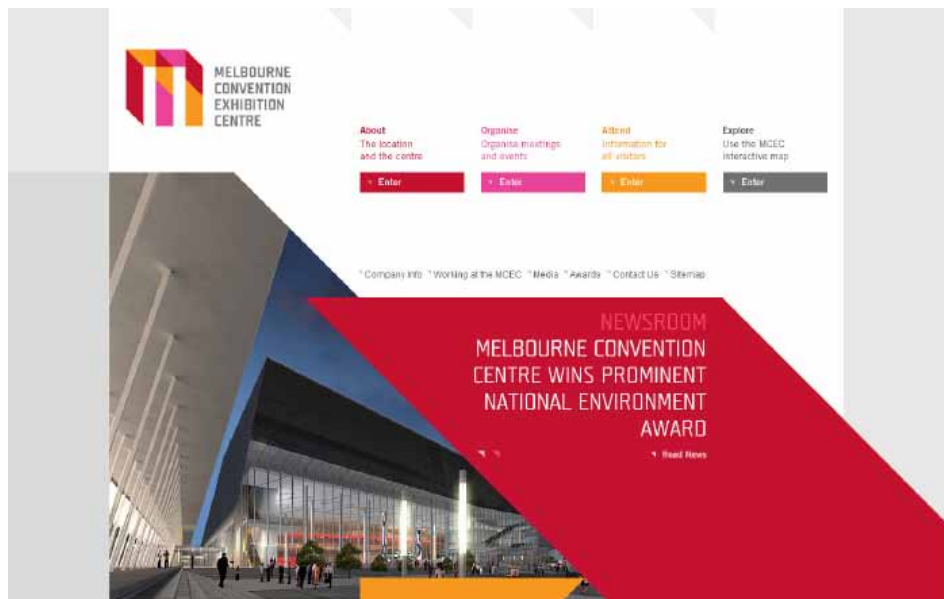
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# DESIGN:

## Melbourne Convention Exhibition Centre (Reactive)

Simplicity and ease of use are two key factors designers strive for when building a new website. According to the judges of our best design category, development company Reactive achieved both when it built the official site for the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre.



Alex Campbell, digital strategist from DTDigital and his colleague, art director Andrew Farrugia, said the clean, bold design of the site feels “very on-brand for MCEC”, and manages to reflect the building’s architecture and logo.

“The clean, organised layout makes finding your way around the site easy.”

Campbell and his team also praised the use of font

replacement technology, which allows Google to read and index headings that appear as images (Google cannot see images).

The site, which records about 24,000 unique browsers and over 100,000 impressions per month, features information on the centre and what it offers for individual groups looking to host a convention. Reactive creative director Tim Kotsiakos says the site works well due to its informative nature.

“What we found was the actual attendees and people going to the building rated low in the MCEC’s priorities, but they wanted to focus on people organising conventions. So we went through the criteria event organisers go through when organising a location, such as research about proximity to location, weather, restaurants and culture.”

“I think the key factor of the site is that it addresses what you’re looking for. If you’re interested in x, the site gives you directions. It’s logical and intuitive, but it’s crafted well and gives visitors the impression of being something refreshing... you get the feeling of ‘that’s exactly what I’m looking for’.”

# BEST SEARCH STRATEGY:

## RetailMeNot

Building a fancy new website worth thousands of dollars won't be worth the effort if users can't find it. Understanding search marketing is a key component of any successful website, which is why coupon retailer RetailMeNet records monthly web traffic of 10 million unique browsers and 22 million page impressions.



The site, which has achieved huge success in the US, is essentially a huge directory of coupons for large retailers including Domino's Pizza, Amazon.com and Victoria's Secret.

Category judge James Thomson, editor of SmartCompany, says the site search optimisation is almost faultless.

“For example, take its amazing Google numbers

– a Google page ranking of 6, almost 2.5 million pages indexed by Google and an impressive 317,161 inbound links,” he says.

“But the real secret here is content – there's just so much of it, it's all extremely relevant to the community and it's all brilliantly optimised for RetailMeNot's keywords.”

But co-founder Guy King says RetailMeNot has achieved search marketing success by ignoring practically every other method tried by rival websites.

“SEO is bullshit. Our philosophy is to focus on pages that are as useful as possible to as many people as possible. Basically this is due to our belief that Google is smarter than we are, so we're better off spending our time building good products rather than abusing the system.”

“Our strategy is really just going against traditional strategies. One of the key metrics of a good website is time on site, but we are trying to get that figure down as much as possible. We want people to find what they're after as quickly as possible.”

# ECOMMERCE:

## Carbonite

Developing a website around an eCommerce offering relies on simplicity and good design in order to make your business stand out. Data backup company Carbonite has managed to achieve a simple eCommerce offering without burdening users, according to category judge Naomi Simson, CEO of RedBalloon.



“Carbonite has an impressive page rank for an organisation so young. Using Wordpress as an underlying technology has minimised its financial outlay, and given them early rewards. It has been innovative and looked at what it can automate to achieve the best scale,” she says.

The website, which offers a data backup service for businesses along with distribution of anti-virus

software, uses blogging software Wordpress in favour of a simple design.

Carbonite product manager Arthur Koulianos says any eCommerce offering relies on ease of use, and the ability for users to buy what they want quickly.

“We have a focus on direct online sales. We wanted people to get a trial quickly and simply, and then we have processes that get them back to buy. We ask for an email address and password, no more and no less, so it’s simple and quick and then we send them a series of emails convincing them to buy.”

“So far it’s working with a conversion rate of about 30%, and that’s growing. We’ve also been working on things like live chat in order to engage with customers a little bit more, and answer questions as soon as they come up. I also work a lot on SEO, but we went from no site last year to ranking in the top 10 entries for several important keywords.”

# BEST SOCIAL MEDIA:

## RetailMeNot

Social marketing is essential for any web-based business, and the winners of our web awards all understand the importance of making themselves known through different channels.



Depending entirely on the online community for work has forced RetailMeNot to be an active player in the social media scene. It currently has over 11,000 fans on its Facebook page and over 2,000 followers on Twitter.

Judge Peter Williams says the site has successfully integrated itself with online communities instead of merely “advertising” itself.

“RetailMeNot have built an active and engaged community around shopping coupons with 40,000 stores across the world. They have a good following on Twitter and use the medium in a direct way which suits their audience.”

“They have an active discussion forum and seem to have really nailed the vibe of the community they seek to serve. It’s a very impressive use of social media to drive results with the passionate bargain hunter and shopping community.”

Co-founder Guy King says the business depends on a thriving community to survive.

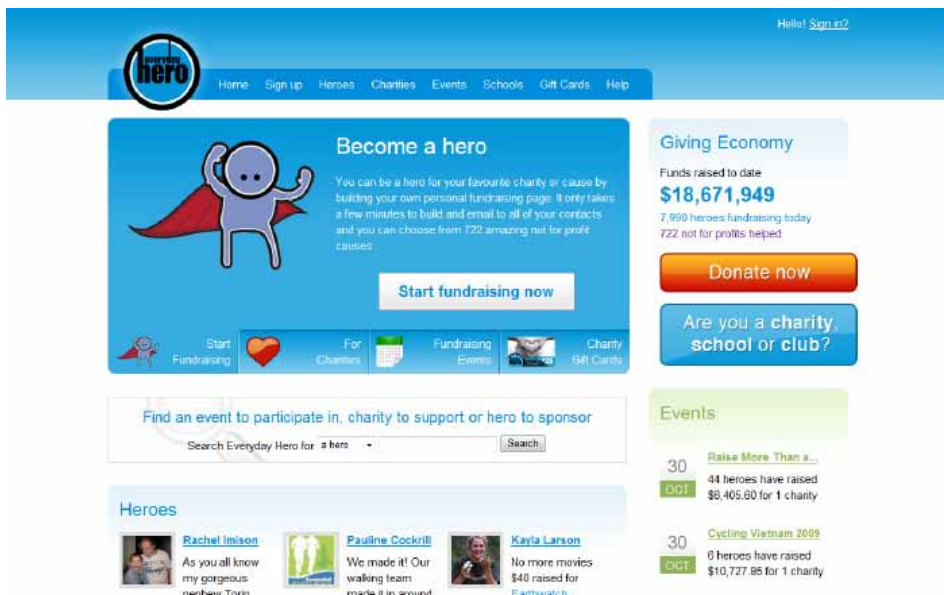
“Absolutely social marketing is important to what we do, because all of our content is shared online. A bit of a loop occurs in that the more people use it the more we find it useful for our business and have a good return on investment, which is really nothing in the start anyway.”

“The good thing is, all of these users are essentially creating content and generate revenue for you. We have something like 72,000 registered users on the site, and they post mini shopping blogs and upload photos of things they’ve bought... they are advocates for your business.”

# BEST ONLINE TOOL:

## Everyday Hero

One of the key factors of our web award winners is simplicity, the ability to create a complex offering in an easy-to-navigate website. According to judge Simon Van Wyk, Hothouse Interactive owner, fundraising site Everyday Hero took out the best online tool award for its no-fuss design.



“The tool is easy to use and delivers a real benefit to the user. The site is really well designed and does a great job of making a complex process quite simple. These guys understand usability is the key to a successful website and they have delivered a site that is useable.”

“Designing sites that look good when filled with other people’s content is not easy and they have done a great job.”

The site, which records about 51,000 uniques per month, offers individuals or groups a tool that allows online fundraising, with only a simple sign-up process required.

Chief executive Nathan Betteridge says the success of the site was based on ease of use for a usually complex task.

“The premise was to make fundraising easier, and we found that by providing a simple online tool for charities we were able to power them up, and make it more convenient for consumers.”

“The key here is to understand the giving experience needs to be simple, but also enjoyable. These organisations are both resource-poor and time-poor, and therefore the technology they use has to be intuitive. We work with all size operations from small schools to large not-for-profits, and they all have the same needs.”

# BEST BLOG:

## Parenting Ideas

There are many ingredients to a successful blog, including strong design, good navigation and great SEO. But the key element is content - the best blogs have a clear connection with their audience and are updated frequently to keep the conversation going.



Michael Grose, parenting educator and founder of the site Parenting Ideas, has been writing in various mediums for many years, and knows his audience intimately. His blog has been chosen by ProBlogger Darren Rowse as the winner of the award for the best blog.

Rowse says this site caught his attention the first time he visited. “The design is eye catching, engaging and easy to navigate, the topic is clearly stated and there is a regular stream of content that is well written.”

Rowse also praised the original and useful nature of the content, and the personal voice used by the author.

Grose says the blog is only part of the writing he does each week, which also includes columns in News Limited newspapers and a fortnightly email newsletter which is distributed to 16,000 people.

Grose says there are a few keys to his writing, including the use of the right voice – authoritative without being patronising. “My area can be quite personal so people don’t like to be lectured.”

In terms of content, Grose says he often draws inspiration from the news cycle (recent posts cover topical areas such as teen drinking) or questions he has been asked by parents.

“It’s about picking up one idea and applying it to the audience.”

And his last tip for would be bloggers? “It’s just a matter of setting aside the time.”

# BEST SITE UNDER 20 STAFF:

## RetailMeNot

Many start-ups that achieve early success find it difficult to scale the business, and end up losing everything. But RetailMeNot has managed to become the biggest coupon site in the world with a staff base of only 10.



Judge Andrew Dalton from Webfirm says the site's success boils down to its perfect timing, and its ability to grow without risking overreaching itself.

“Like any good online business, this concept has plenty of scope for scale and global reach. It's a surprisingly well-coordinated project for the budget. I look forward to seeing where this goes; mobile vouchering perhaps?”

Co-founder Guy King says the small staff base is a positive. While some businesses are often looking for ways to bring on new workers, King says he made a conscious decision to keep the team small.

“We've got 10 full-time staff and one part-timer. We keep it small for various reasons, with a big one being we don't want to be running ad teams and so on. We want to be focused on innovating, and that's got us as far as we have.”

“The small staff lets us move quickly rather than being tied down in the day-to-day administration details. We're fairly busy, and that's an understatement, but we have lots of tools that automate various roles, so we invest the time into automating processes instead of hiring people.”

# BEST SITE OVER 20 STAFF:

## Lasoo

Several start-ups have achieved success by collecting content for users that otherwise would have required an extensive search. Lasoo founder Paul Marshall noticed sites such as Seek, Realestate.com.au and Carsales.com.au becoming successful by aggregating content, and decided to get on the trend with retail.



Marshall says there was a gap in the market for a retail offering that essentially did all the work a consumer couldn't be bothered with.

"These sites enabled people to quickly search for what they wanted. At that time there was nothing to summarise or aggregate everything they wanted to pay. We just take catalogue data and digitise it, and it allows people to search for everything from groceries to digital cameras."

"We have 34 staff in total, but it's a model where we hopefully won't have too many more on staff. We're also going to grow into other areas such as travel, and even automotive as our traffic grows, but we've found a good niche in general retail."

Lasoo has also been quick to catch up on social marketing, and recently released an iPhone App that emulates all the features available on the site.

Judge Andrew Dalton from Webfirm says the site, which records over one million uniques per month, has achieved success by making it easy for users to find what they want whether on the web or a smartphone.

"A wonderfully executed site all round. The design has impact without clutter and never forgets the importance of browser usability, and the attention to detail with social marketing should be commended."

"The business concept also appears to be original and timely in this economic climate. Overall this site has plenty to offer across the board."