THE WEBSITE REDESIGN THAT’S HURTING YOUR BUSINESS

This is the fourth post in the Optimize Prime: Fight the Battle for Better Conversion series on A/B testing and web conversion tactics.

Does your newly redesigned website look and work great but have a lower conversion rate than your previous website? Drawing from years of consulting and being on in-house teams, I can tell you that it happens ALL THE TIME.

Redesigns usually upgrade many things about your website but can inadvertently hurt other critical factors. The new website usually IS better in many ways but introduces one or various detrimental changes. In addition, because so many things change in the process, it can be difficult to isolate and clearly understand issues.

Here’s a typical scenario:
1. Company X hires a digital agency or assigns in-house team to rebrand/redesign their site.
2. This team does a ton of research, leverages customer personas, creates visitor journeys and designs a beautiful website full of “best practices” on a platform that is faster and more advanced than the old site.
3. Company X then has a ceremonious new website launch only to see web orders do their best Blockbuster Video impression.
4. Company X spends the next year trying to recover from this mishap by spending more on media to offset their lower conversion rate and trying to resolve the problems.
If this has happened to you, you’re not alone; many companies make this mistake and lose a ton of money in the process. If you’re yet to make this mistake, then this is a good post to read. Follow these five steps, and you’ll never have to suffer through this situation:

**#1. BUILD A PROJECT PLAN THAT INCLUDES OPTIMIZATION**

*What typically happens:* Company X starts planning for the launch of its new website by clearly defining the scope of the project. This typically includes time and resources for research, design, content, production, quality assurance, launching the site and even post-launch bug fixes. It is a necessary step that helps allocate teams, uncover gaps, estimate cost and create a schedule needed to set expectations with stakeholders or clients.

*The problem:* Most of the time this project planning assumes that the new site will be successful immediately and assumes that the team will no longer be needed post-launch. It is a huge gamble (many times a multi-million dollar bet) that the new site will bring in more revenue than the old site. It doesn’t take into consideration that the new website may reduce conversion rates. Then any attempt to include optimization work after planning has ended is seen as adding scope and difficult to get approved.

*Suggested solution:* With any website redesign, the expectation must be set in the early project planning/scoping stage that optimization efforts will be needed. If they are not needed, then you can use that time to try to make that great site even better, but don’t count on it. Everyone, up to the CEO or VP that is sponsoring the project must understand that launching a new site is not the objective. The objective is to launch a website that increases revenue, leads, content consumption or whatever user action is most critical to your company.

If you have already passed the project planning stage and have not included optimization, it will be painful to get the project plan updated to include it. However, it will be much more painful to have the team scrambling to find a remedy to poor conversion after the new site is live.

**#2. MINIMIZE YOUR RISK VIA A/B TESTING**

*What typically happens:* Company X sets a hard launch date. On this date, the old website ceases to exist and the new website is shown to all visitors. For better or worse, they take the plunge.
The problem: In this scenario, all visitors are exposed to the new website and the old website is history. Again, this is a huge gamble, yet many people don’t consider the possible disaster waiting ahead. If the new website has a lower conversion, it will have a negative effect on your ENTIRE user population, leading to huge losses that can be difficult to recover from. Even if you diligently analyze website performance pre- and post-launch, you still expose yourself to extreme risk. Additionally, pre/post comparisons include many environmental differences, making it impossible to have a fair comparison.

Suggested solution: Before deploying the new website to everyone that reaches your domain, run an A/B test with only 10%-15% of your visitors. During the test, measure all critical KPIs, and analyze any differences between version A and B. Many companies cringe at this idea and agencies that aren’t experienced with this practice hate it. That’s because A/B testing makes it more difficult to estimate timelines (it can be difficult to estimate exactly how many test iterations will be needed) and quickly uncovers whether the new website is better or worse than the old website. This tactic gives you a glimpse of your future conversion rate before you open the floodgates and gives you the opportunity to optimize beforehand or at least know what you’re in for.

#3. HAVE A GOOD MEASUREMENT PLAN

What typically happens: Nothing out of the ordinary. Most companies with at least a little online marketing knowledge have reports that track advertising campaigns, visitor count, conversions, conversion rate and maybe even the most popular pages.

The problem: Regular reports usually do not provide you with actionable insights. If conversion rate decreases after a redesign, it could be for 100 different reasons. It’s similar to getting a fever – you know something is wrong, but you don’t know exactly why. If you have just regular reports when you launch a new website, you may know what happened as a result of the new site, but you’ll have no idea why.

Suggested solution: Prepare to do some serious investigative analysis as soon as that new website has any user data. Before you even start the redesign, do the following things:

- Assign your best analyst or analysts to the task of understanding how the new website performs compared to the old website and why.
- Create a measurement plan that clearly defines how the new website will be evaluated against the old one. This will help you and all stakeholders understand how success will be measured.
#4. ANALYZE YOUR DATA AND LET IT GUIDE YOU

**What typically happens:** The new website launches and conversion rate decreases. To offset the lower conversion rate and stop the revenue bleeding, extra media is purchased to bring more visitors to the site – this may maintain revenue at the cost of reducing your ROI. Additionally, a design/user experience “expert” is brought in to fix the problem. Company X then implements creative changes dictated by the expert and crosses its fingers once again that they can increase conversion.

**The problem:** In this situation, nobody truly knows why conversion has decreased and guesses are often made, which lead to poor attempts at fixing the situation. Sure, design and user experience experts can help, but without truly analyzing site usage patterns, you are severely decreasing your chances of success.

**Suggested solution:** Take the time to clearly understand how visitors are using the new website. Bring in that star analyst to investigate the situation and draw insights from the usage data or visitor feedback.

#5. HAVE A FLEXIBLE SCHEDULE

**What typically happens:** A timeline is created with hard dates in order to fit other projects into the year’s schedule. The new website must be launched on a specific date and all work on it must stop at a certain point so that the people on that team can start working on other important projects.

**The problem:** What if the new website doesn’t convert as well as the old one, and you haven’t yet figured out how to bring it back to par? Will the team simply abandon the project so that they can begin work on another project? Having such hard timelines with such an important project puts you between a rock and hard place – you’ll either have to live with the new website’s poor conversion or put off some other important project.

**Suggested solution:** The expectation should be set early that the new website project does not end until the new website is at least as effective as the old one. Therefore the team that will be working on this project should be given ample time to run multiple optimization tests, diligently analyze performance and implement something.
that doesn’t hurt the business. It should be a special team without a hard schedule. This is difficult for some companies to accept because it makes it difficult to do resource planning. However in this case, the objective is more important than a schedule. A company should always have a roadmap, but timelines should not compromise project success for the sake of making a specific date.

IN SUMMARY
Launching a new website that hurts conversion is worse then having done nothing at all, but I’m not suggesting that you shouldn’t try to innovate and redesign as needed. I’m suggesting that there’s a way to do it right. Set the expectation early that optimization will be required. Do an A/B test prior to launch. Have a good measurement plan. Analyze user data and let it guide you – don’t guess. And finally, have a flexible schedule that allows you to launch something great – success is more important than meeting a deadline.

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