

Who's Your Homepage?

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Who's Your Homepage?

The homepage is, of course, the most important page on your website. If your site were a book it would be the cover. Your site's homepage ought to establish the site's main theme, and begin to hint at the most important content.

However, unlike a book, whose cover provides the very first impression, many of your site's visitors do not see your site's homepage first. Due to the non-linear nature of the web, and the way search engines work, the very first page for many visitors is not the homepage. Rather, it may be an internal page found through a search, or that was targeted from a link.

This month's newsletter is about first impressions. The dynamic nature of lateral site traffic requires web designers and content editors to think a little differently so that your site will have a good first impression, wherever a visitor may land.

If you want to sell a book, you have one opportunity to make a good first impression... on the cover. If you wander through your local bookstore, you will see thousands of tomes vying for your attention. If one catches your eye, you might pull it off the shelf for a closer look, inspect the back cover, and read the inside flaps. If the book passes this quick assessment, you might start flipping through, sampling a few paragraphs or maybe reading its table of contents.

Now imagine a publisher's horror if booksellers stopped displaying books by their covers! What if, instead, they opened up each book to what they thought was a particularly relevant page and simply left it open for customers to read in order to determine whether or not they would buy the book? How would they compete with other books? How would they get your attention with compelling titles and vibrant photography and illustrations? This is exactly the challenge web designers and web content editors face when they create and maintain websites. Any given visit has as great a likelihood to begin on a subpage as it does the homepage. Traffic to your site that begins with a subpage can be referred to as indirect traffic as apposed to direct traffic, which starts from your site's homepage. Sometimes indirect sessions eventually click to a site's homepage, while other times they do not. While we like to think that our homepages allow us to put our best face forward, in many cases, a homepage is the second, fifth, tenth, or seventeenth impression... if it adds to the impression at all.

Benefits of indirect site traffic

No doubt, the dynamics of indirect traffic presents some problems for conventional marketing and copywriting. I'll talk about some of the ways these problems can be addressed, but first I'd like to point out some benefits and opportunities that indirect traffic to your website can afford.

Many of your site's visitors will come from search engine results or links from other sites directly to one of your site's a subpages. As a result, the content on every subpage has an opportunity to compete with content from any source in the world. For example, suppose, hypothetically, that I know something about maintaining a productive, clean, and well-protected chicken coop. If I did have such knowledge, and I had a blog, I might put some of my insights on the subject of effective egg laying environments online. Now suppose you're a new hobby farmer (can you tell I just moved into a new house in the countryside of lovely Chapel Hill, North Carolina?) and you want some good tips on setting up a chicken coop. You might go to Barnes and Noble, wander through the farming section, and pick up a book like *Chicken Tractor* or *Hen and the Art of Chicken Maintenance* (I didn't make that title up). Of course, my practical tidbits on raising chickens would be nowhere to be found among these classics. On the other hand, if this hypothetical chicken newbie went online and typed "chicken yard tips" into Google they might find my theoretical page on how to raise egg layers without all the stinky mess. Now my content concerning chickens could be read and compared to any other source... whether they are published and distributed on paper or not.

On the web, content on every page of your site has the chance of being considered alongside the world's knowledge of the given subject. As a result, you don't have to be a famous author with a powerful publisher to get into the marketplace of ideas. You just need a website and a keyboard.

Website First Impressions

The challenge of controlling indirect traffic

There is a flip side to accessibility... one that makes creating a solid website difficult. It's easier to establish a consistent, clear, and well-organized message in linear media like books and magazines. Maintaining a well-organized message across a website, on the other hand, is extremely challenging. While we like to think of a site's homepage as its cover, in reality any page can become a "homepage" in the sense that it may be a visitor's first impression, the first contact with your site... and your company!

Questions to ask of a site's subpages

Stop and think about your site. Consider the impression any random subpage would give if it were a visitor's first point of entry. Has the page been well-considered? Does it stand on its own merits? Does it have anything to say for itself? Examining the subpage, are there visual clues that the page is part of a larger story? Is it clear to the visitor where in the story they have happened onto? If the content of this page is part of a sequence, is the preceding or proceeding content clearly referenced? When this page stands alone, without the context of a preceding page, does it give a false impression? Does the page lead the visitor into other areas of the site which give the content context? When this page stands alone, does it comply with the site's overall marketing message?

The more pages your site has, the more interrelationships there are between subpages and the rest of the site. Maintaining consistent themes throughout dozens or even hundreds of pages is a huge challenge. But if the job is done well, each page can be part of a team that draws and leads visitors from tangential subjects into discovering your company's products or services, regardless of how "important" the individual page is to the overall site.

Focusing on the most popular subpages

Depending on how many pages your site has, careful consideration of each perspective, inter-relationship, or possible tangential purpose may not be practical. Of course, by reviewing your site's traffic logs (or our [Google tracking tools](#), if you have them installed on your site), you can easily review the pages that draw the most entry traffic and peg those which function, in a sense, as your site's homepage for that visit. The pages that get the most traffic should get the most attention in their function as the site's surrogate homepage.

Breaking out of the top-down point of view

When we are designing and developing a website, we work through our prototyping and design phases, starting with the homepage and working our way inward. Since we design the homepage first, and write copy for the homepage first, it's only natural that we that we get used to thinking about our sites from this logical, yet artificial, point of view. Yet in practice, many visitors will experience non-linear paths through the site, perhaps even missing the homepage altogether.

A healthy practice when designing and writing for the web is to pick a random subpage and to consider what a visitor's experience might be if it was the first page they saw. For a new site, this takes a bit of subjectivity and creativity. After a site has been online, you can actually see where these instances take place and study the resulting paths using search engine tracking tools. Not only that, but you can also see the actual phrase used that brought visitor to the site, as well as the particular page they landed on, and where they went from there. Observing the most popular instances and common trends is one way to fine tune a site's content, navigation, and organization.

Benefits From the Long Tail of Search

Controlling indirect traffic

For example, a couple years ago I wrote a two part newsletter called "[Web design tips for the print designer](#)." I also broke this article up into multiple pages (See "[Search Engine Optimization Strategy](#)" April 2004, for more information on index pages). One of the index pages was titled "Common Web Design Mistakes." This particular index page gets lots of traffic from search engines. When I began to notice this trend, I thought about how visitors were coming to this particular page. Because I knew the phrase they used, and the page they landed on, I could presume a bit about them and what they needed. I presumed that visitors coming to this page were likely to be strong prospects

for our agency partnership. Therefore, I decided to place our [agency partnership](#) graphic with our mission statement on that page along with a few other pertinent links.

In another example, I deliberately created subpages designed to be the first page for very specific visitors with specific needs. Our case study index pages contain a few case studies pages about sites we've built for venture capital companies. I used the phrase "[early stage venture capital websites](#)" for one of these index/case study pages. The logic behind this strategy is to intentionally create a subpage to function as a landing page for visitors looking specifically for a site for a venture capital company. Knowing that I expect these pages to be the first impression from this kind of visit, I pre-think the next bits of information that such a visitor might want, and lead them to this related content. In this example, I used an [overview of how our particular services, methodology, and capabilities fit the needs of venture capital and start-up VC funded companies](#) to follow up the strategic index page.

So, Who's your homepage?

Well in a sense, any of your pages can be the first page a visitor sees, and thus be their "homepage." It takes some extra work to think about your website in non-linear ways. But if we can break out of our book-oriented, outside-in way of thinking, we can make indirect traffic work powerfully to our advantage.