

Our Web Site

Is it broken?

If the goal of our web site is to convert those with a passing notion about [REDACTED] into donors to advancement or prospects for admission, then our web site is broken.

If the goal of our web site is to inform our visitors of our programs, the evidence of their excellence, and the procedures to enroll in them, then our web site is mostly broken.

If the goal of our web site is to engage with visitors, answer their questions, and reach out to them after their visit, then our web site is broken.

What should our web site do?

The web site needs to inform visitors with the following types of information:

- Features and benefits of [REDACTED] programs
- Stories and evidence of the excellence of our students, faculty, and programs
- Details of the operations and procedures necessary to participate in those programs

The web site needs to deliver that information to computers at home and abroad, mobile phones, screen readers, and other devices. And because the web site is not the only way people consume information, content published to the web site must also look beautiful on the printed page and be automatically transformable into an email newsletter.

The site should answer questions, not passively, but actively. A visitor who's wondering about an unexplained detail of a program should have the opportunity to ask on the same page that explains the features and benefits of that program. We must be as welcoming and prepared to answer those questions in that form as we are to answering the phone. We must remember that the web site is not simply a dump for information, but a place to actively engage with visitors who are there because they expect answers and engagement online.

Finally, and most significantly, the web site needs to be the central component of our admissions efforts. Sign up forms must allow visitors to request additional information about our many programs, an email campaign to those who sign up must be developed and executed, and our business processes must be expanded to work with those prospects.

What should it look like?

It will look different, it must look different. A beautiful visual design that reflects and represents [REDACTED]'s values is needed to support the functional purpose of the site. Similar care must also be taken in designing the interactions with our visitors. Better than what it should look like, we should ask what it should feel like. The experience of signing up for additional information must feel good. Using a form to estimate yearly tuition expenses or otherwise engaging with us should be fun.

How do we make it happen?

We need to develop a visual identity for [REDACTED] that works on the web, in email, in print, and elsewhere. We need to implement that visual design in templates for those media.

We need to build tools that allow visitors to engage more interactively with us via the web. Car companies encourage their visitors to design their car and estimate their payments online. Visitors to luggage manufacturers expect to customize the materials and components of their products. Retailers allow visitors to ask questions and find answers. We need similar tools, and we need to develop CRM workflows that integrate those interactions and leverage them.

We need to integrate a communications component into every program, and we need to develop those communications first for the web.

I need to spend more time working with people across campus to help them leverage the web and related tools in their communications, while also investing more time in developing the overall message that our web site communicates.

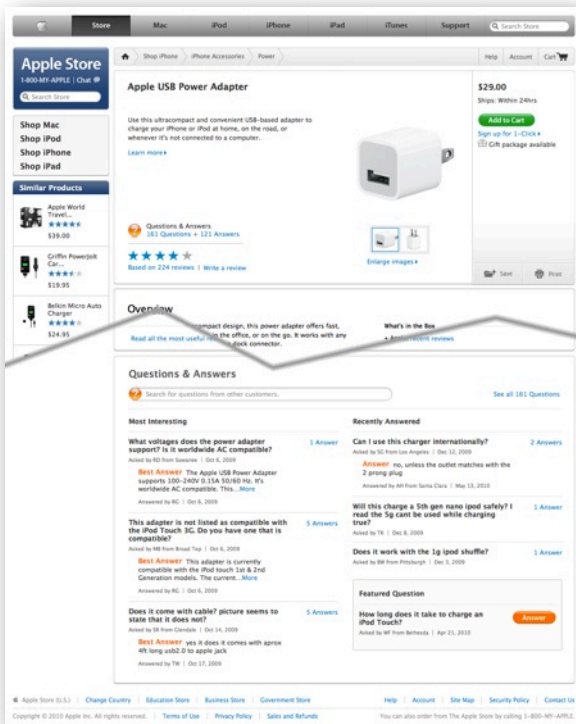
How much will it cost?

Fixing our web site demands three things: a capital investment in the design and technology of the web site, professional staff time to work with departments in their communications, and continued student/non-status staff time to assist with content creation and conversion.

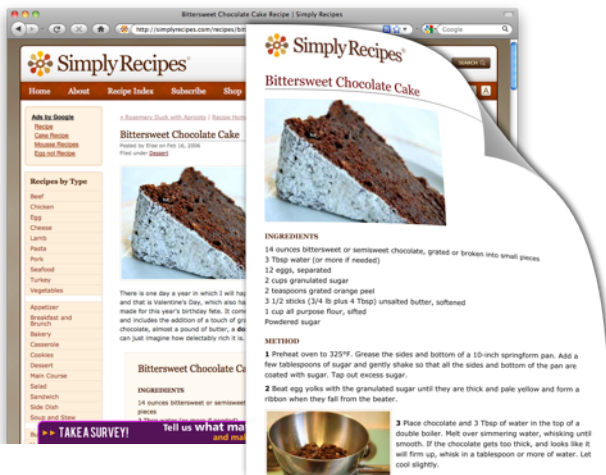
- One or more agencies/contractors to work on user experience, design, and technology. \$90,000
- A web staff person to focus on student stories, liaison with academic departments and student affairs, and maintain and develop [REDACTED]'s reputation in social media. The staff person would be expected to write and format stories, photograph, shoot and edit video, and do basic graphic design necessary to support web, email, and social media communications. The position should not be classified as technical, but would demand and demonstrate the strong technical skills that are required for communication in the web age. Salary: \$salary/year
- Videographer/editor: 20 hours/week, \$[REDACTED]/hour
- Student assistants: 40 hours/week, \$[REDACTED]/hour

It's not science fiction

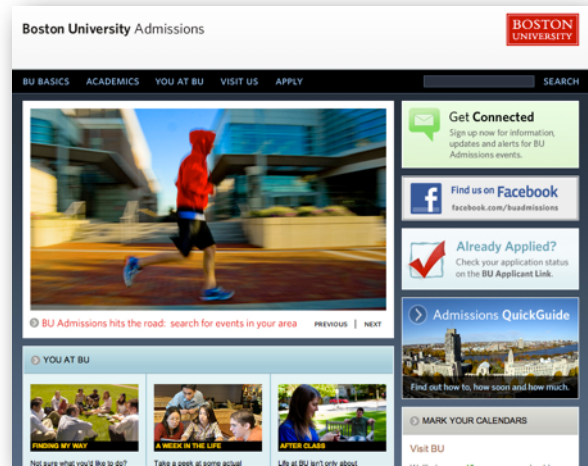
Real world examples demonstrate both the technology and web-oriented attention to content development that's needed to rebuild [redacted]'s web presence.



Questions and answers on a product page at the Apple Store. That's 161 questions!



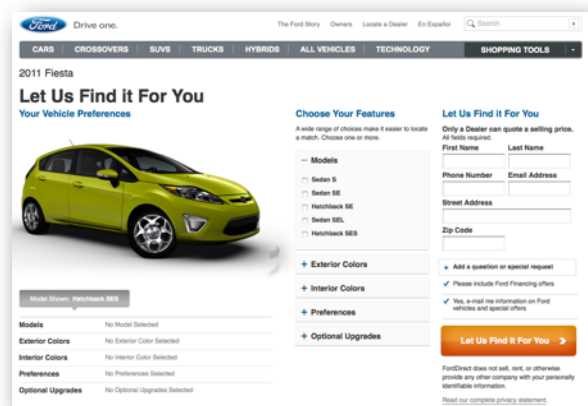
Web and print-optimized versions of a recipe at Simply Recipes.com



Integration of design and editorial keeps the BU admissions site fresh and interesting; easy signup helps turn visitors into prospects.



Creating a custom messenger bag at Timbuk2.com



Ford makes it easy to select automobile colors and options, and sign up for a quote.

Room for improvement

171,890

Visits to admissions information September 1, 2009 through May 1, 2010.

Those visitors viewed 1,664,979 pages throughout the web site.

2.35%

The percentage of those visitors who also visited the viewbook request form.

Most, but not all complete the form, yielding under 4K prospects.

48%

The percentage of those 171K admissions-related visitors that are new to our web site.

That's about 83,000 new visits from people who arrived at our web site with some interest in admission to our programs.

9% — 17%

The percentage of visitors to Amazon.com who buy something during their visit (varies by season).

Some online florists can boast over 40% in April and May.

20

The number of undergraduate academic departments (including COBA).

0

The number of those departments that have posted news of their students or faculty on their front page this year. Really.

What help might an agency or contractor offer?

Optimizing the web site to convert visitors to the site into admissions prospects demands a relationship between the design of the the site that progressively leads visitors to admissions info, the design of the forms those visitors fill out, our Banner systems that must accept that data, and followup communications.

Design is cheap, effective design is a bit more complex. A contractor experienced with conversion optimization can speed and ease our way through that process. Just as we have engaged consultants to assist with the development of our printed admissions viewbook and supplemental materials, similar assistance would be appropriate with our web site.

The field is user experience (UX) design. I'm aware of at least two qualified agencies that are likely within our budget:

- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]

In order, those agencies were founded by the authors of these books on the subject:

- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]

The project should result in the following:

- Optimized UX design for the entire web site
- New visual templates for the entire web site, including multiple variations of landing pages, single story pages, and index/aggregator pages
- Implementation of that design in web, email, and print templates
- Code development and integration work to add features and interactions identified by the UX design

The market for these services includes service providers offering a broad range of skills at an equally broad range of costs. [One full-service agency](#) happily announces that potential customers should expect to spend a minimum of \$100,000 on an engagement with them. Smaller agencies will demand a lower price, identifying a qualified agency among the larger number at that level will take some care.

Glven the importance of success in this area, our need for quick action, and my survey of costs, I'd estimate the budget for such a project at approximately \$90,000.



Does using a template mean everything will look the same? No. These screenshots are all from the same web site, all part of the same template.

