The importance of a site map in your website

Forming rock-solid foundations for your website

By Kimberley Ward

"Creating your site map is an integral step in defining the foundation and functionality of your website..."

Part two of a six article series that focuses on the importance of your web presence as an integral component of your practice marketing. I will walk you through the web development process step-by-step, giving a real life example along the way.

Following preparation of a detailed brief for your web developer, supply of a site map is the next step in creating your new practice website. A sitemap is essentially a model of a website that identifies each of the pages contained within the site and the way in which the pages are linked or related.

Creating your site map is an integral step in defining the foundation and functionality of your website. Once you have determined your brief, the next step is to give form to the information, images and concepts you wish to have on your website. Once this has been crystallized on paper, a developer can get to work building the site and making it a reality.

When devising your site map, it is important to think very carefully about what you want to include and ask yourself these questions:

1. Will your site include lots of textual information?
If so, break the text into many smaller pieces and separate this over many pages to ensure your users can easily find the information they are after.

2. Will your site include many images?
If so, would it make sense to add a page that is an 'image gallery'?

3. Will you have various users that are visiting the site and using it in different ways?
If so, you might like to have a secure log-in section for one group of users, for example referring doctors, that other users can't view.

4. Will users visit your site purely to obtain information? Or do you want them to be able to interact with you?
If this is the case, then you should consider including web-based forms that allow your visitors to contact you.

Another important consideration is the way in which you anticipate visitors will travel through your site. By grouping information in a logical way, you are effectively guiding the user to make it easy. You need to determine the best way to 'bundle' information by breaking the content you want the site to include into major headings first. By deciding on your top navigation bars and then filtering the information down into smaller and smaller bite size chunks, you are allowing visitors to your site to discover more information in the areas of interest and avoid information that is not pertinent to them.

Breaking the content of these major headings into sub-headings for sub-pages will allow users to not only move through your site more effectively, but also digest information more effectively. A study at Arizona State University concluded that students that read information online had lower levels of
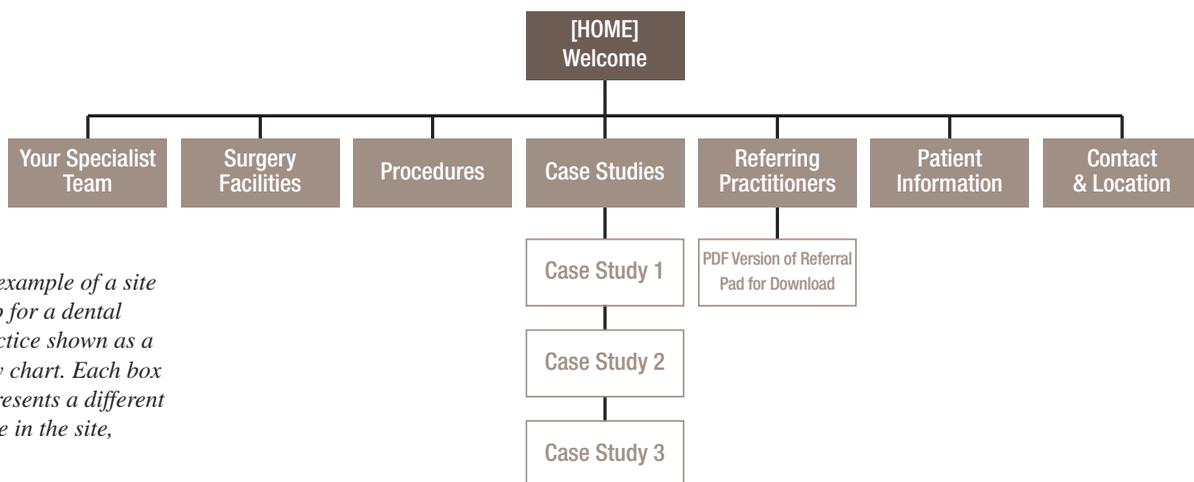
An example of a site map for a dental practice shown as a flow chart. Each box represents a different page in the site,
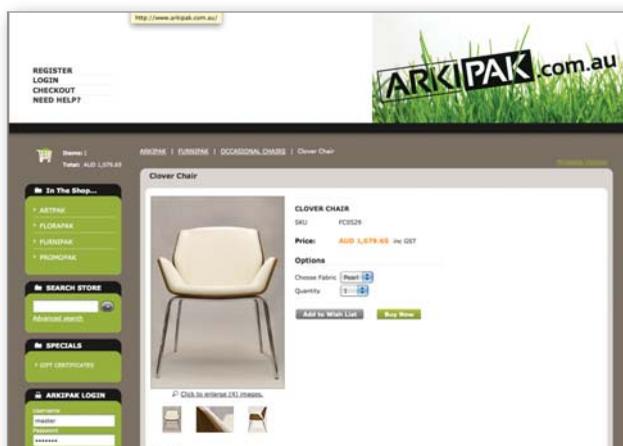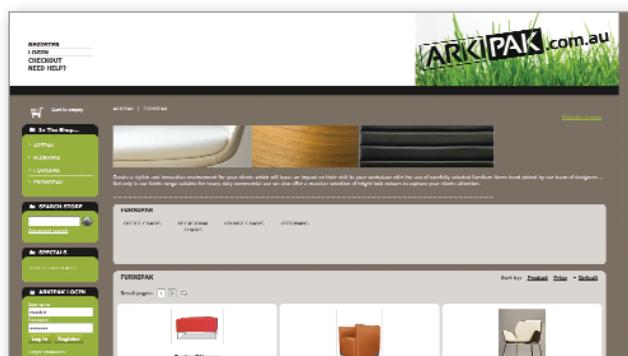
If you select the Furnipak menu option from the home page of the Arkipak website, you can view all the products in the range (Above). If you click on one of these, you see details for that product (right).

comprehension and retention than when that same information was provided in print. With this in mind, all writing for web should aim to provide information in short concise sections.

If you need guidance on how to break your content into separate pages, ask your web designer and trust the suggestions they make regarding the grouping of information - they generally have years of experience of breaking larger sections of information into many well thought out smaller sections and working with clients to determine the best way of directing users around a website.

In all instances, this navigation through your site should really be intuitive and users should always be able to identify how to get to the information they require. You should constantly be asking yourself 'does the way I'm moving through the site make sense? Is there a more logical way to group information or progress through the site?'.

Another added benefit of creating a site map for your website, is that you can index

your site with search engines once it is complete and live. Browser spiders can crawl your site map as well as the content of the site itself to ascertain what your website includes. Google's program 'Google Sitemaps' is the best known search engine program that allows web developers to easily upload a sitemap for indexing, whilst Yahoo, Bing and Ask also have software programs that support this function.

As an example, when building the sitemap for the Arkipak online store, determining the product categories was the first step. Products were grouped logically into 'Artpak' which includes printed canvas artwork, 'Furnipak' which contains all furniture including lounge chairs, office chairs, and ottomans, 'Florapak' for all faux-flora and 'Promopak' for promotional items. These product categories created the main pages in the sites top navigation.

The next step was to identify additional information that was required for the site and where these pages would sit in relation to the rest of the site. Pages for

'Specials', 'How to Shop', and site 'Terms and Conditions' were created and included in the second tier of navigation, grouped separately from the product pages. Additional pages that don't appear in the top navigation, but are seen once users make a purchase, also had to be included within the site map, clearly outlining their relationship to other pages within the site. By creating this map, we clearly defined each page within the site and their relationship to one another.

About the Author

Kimberley Ward is Business Development and Marketing Manager, for Levitch Design Associates, one of Australia's leading healthcare interior design consultancies who offer an integrated approach to practice presentation. Custom corporate identity solutions, brand development, graphic / web design, promotional strategies and marketing campaigns are some of the services provided. For more info, contact (02) 9880-9300 or visit www.levitch.com.au