

KEY WEB SITE DECISIONS FOR MUSICIANS

Presented by Indy Music Technologies

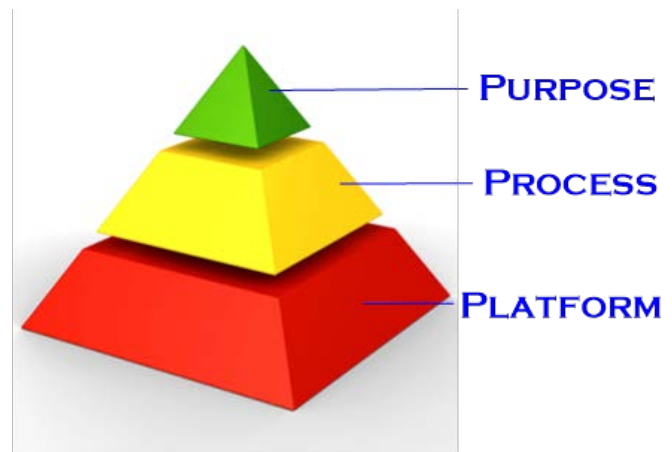
You've decided a Facebook page isn't enough and you need a web site, or you're considering a re-design of your existing site. Band and musician web sites have been around for so long now that it almost seems like an automatic thing: what's there to think about? Actually, there are quite a few things to think about if you want your web site to work well, meet your goals, satisfy your fans, and move your music business forward. A key starting point is that your own web site is one of the two structural elements of your platform (along with your performances), and it is thus a key part in connecting and developing contacts, customers, followers and fans (the human elements)!

Purpose

Let's start with purpose. Whether you're considering a new web site or a re-design, start with a couple of basic questions about purpose and concept.

What's the purpose or what's the site concept? Here's where you need to answer the question about why you're doing this—and what the outcomes look like. First and foremost, these days a web site is way more than a place to find new fans or share your music and or tour dates. Your website is one of the key structural elements in your platform, and along with live performance, the one that drives most of your revenue.

Are you trying to increase contacts?
Are you trying to drive numbers and metrics to make a case with a label?
Are you trying to build and expand a fan base? Are you trying to increase direct sales? Convert fans to superfans? Are you trying to engage super fans to provide feedback on new compositions and recordings? The answers to these questions tell you how to create your web site. How you answer these question shapes not just what pages are on your web site, but how you build them.



With purpose and concept defined, you can drill down to define the goals which are the key things you have to do to achieve the purpose and execute the concept. If you're trying to increase revenue, then you want a Store page with direct sales of physical and digital product. If you're touring a lot and want to drive ticket sales and build a fan base, you need a Tour page with a link to online ticket sales. If you are trying to drive metrics on streaming services or social media, you need pages to move site visitors in

that direction. If you're trying to engage fans about your music, you need a Music page that presents or introduces visitors and fans to your recordings—maybe even offers you own on-site streaming.

You may say to yourself: most musician sites have all these pages so what's the big deal? That may be true, but the point is that until you work through the process you can't be sure 1) your goals actually tie to your purpose, and 2) that your implementation of the goals is optimal and works well.

Chicken or the Egg

The first big challenge is often between (or confusing) graphic design with functional design. It's way too easy to get caught up in cool graphics, images and fonts that are all about creating a certain "look and feel." The problem is that when graphic design is put ahead of functional design, it's easy to end up with cool design and poor function. And, sad to say, it's poor function that has the worst negative impact on your visitors and fans.

Here's the thing: once your visitors and fans have seen your graphic design, they've got it – that is, they've got a picture in their head that relates the graphic design to you, your music, your band, etc. That's not going to change unless you change your graphic design. That's why big major sites are very careful about web site re-design, because it is closely associated with brand image and you don't want to negatively impact your brand image. And, once visitors and fans have that brand image in their minds what they are interacting with is functional design.



All this said, you want a good and cool graphic design that both conveys your brand image and engages your visitors. You also want good functional design so the site performs to visitor and fan expectations. Does your site have the right types of pages? Is navigation easy and intuitive? Is the design clean or cluttered? Do the pages load easily and quickly? Is it optimized for mobile platforms? Can fans find what they want when they want it. This all matters because as Gartner Research points out: "digital content must make itself available to a user when and where it's needed." Your site has to be designed to perform well for visitors and fans where ever they are!

Loading, Latency and Abandonment

Let's start with some current data points from a recent SOASTA/Akamai Research study *The State of Online Retail Performance*, Spring 2017:

- Almost half of all consumers browse via their mobile devices but only 22% buy on mobile
- A two second delay in load time increases bounce/abandonment rates by 103%
- A two-second delay correlated with up to a 51% decrease in session length

- 28% of users won't return to a slow site
- On Black Friday 2015, 57% of traffic came from mobile devices
- The "sweet spot" for peak conversions is 2.4 second load time

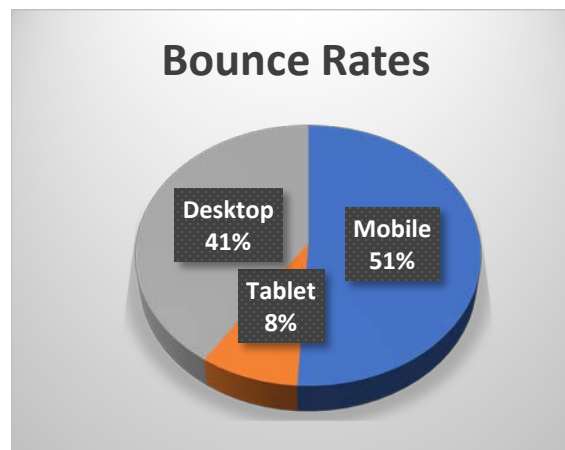
The two dynamics that this data assesses are engaging and retaining your visitors and fans on your site, and converting them to customers who purchase something from your Store. To assure your web site doesn't fall into the poor performing categories, you have to worry about load times, latency and abandonment.

A good example is that testing your web site performance on a fast internet connection on your computer at home, or a fast wireless connection at Starbucks doesn't cut it. If almost 60% of your visitors and fans can be using mobile devices then a large percentage of them aren't on the fastest networks available—frequently they're using an available network and have no control over bandwidth and that directly effects page load times. You also have to worry about latency—that's delay, how long it takes data to travel from the server your site is located on to your fan's mobile device—and that really matters for playing music and videos and for track samples in your Store.

Here's an example everyone's had of low bandwidth speed and low latency: you click on a web link and after a noticeable delay the web page begins to load, but it takes a while and you see images load one-by-one! That's almost certainly going to take more than two seconds, and you're already facing visitor abandonment! The point is you can't control network bandwidth or latency, but you can control your graphic and functional design and make sure they are optimized for mobile devices and mediocre networks. A simple rule of thumb: don't load up on high res images because the more images on a page the longer the page load times.

Optimizing for Mobile

As we've seen, as many as 60% of visitors and fans browse with mobile devices, and load times correlate with bounce rates. Beyond bandwidth and latency, you also have to worry about being mobile optimal. This means assuring that your site and its pages are optimized for the different screen sizes and dimensions of mobile platforms. First off, most mobile devices are vertical rectangles, not horizontal rectangles, and need to be re-formatted vs. desktop displays. Then there are the different dimension between a mobile phone and a tablet.



Source: *The State of Online Retail Performance, Spring 2017*

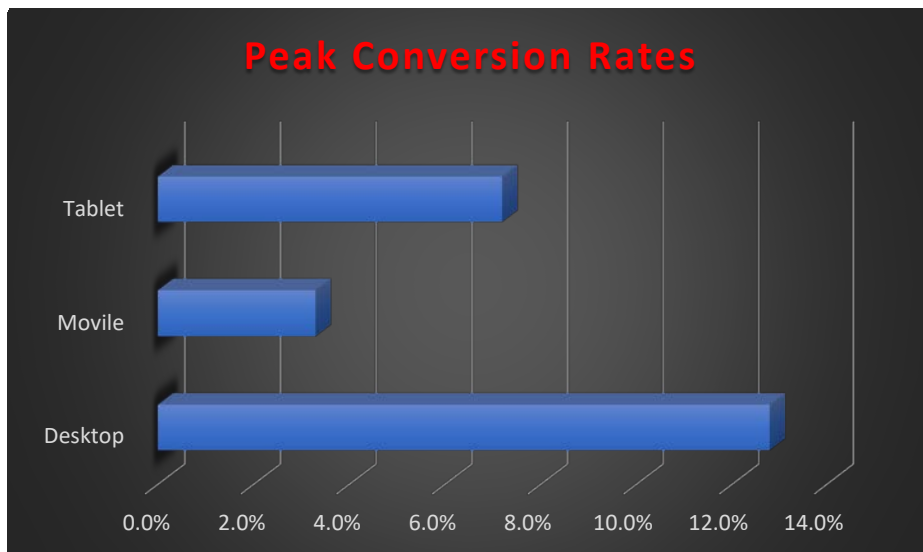
Unless your site is built using the right technology to address these differences and deliver the right pages to specific platforms, you end up trying to jam a web page designed for a computer screen onto a

phone or tablet screen. That leads to quick frustration and risk of abandonment—and contributes to the bounce rates.

There are various web technologies that achieve this, among the most common being CSS (cascading style sheets) which reformat the page based on the device the page is being sent to. Dealing with mobile devices is one reason that a single long web page is suddenly becoming so popular. It makes sense, right: it's easier and simpler to have one page to load that all the links and pages on a regular web site? The problem is that now you have all your content (copy, images, links, music, video, store, etc.) on a single page and that page is now way bigger in size than just a regular home page, and it will take a lot longer to load if it isn't optimized. If your fan is on a network with low bandwidth and/or high latency, you've risked going with a design that results in slow load times.

The SOASTA/Akamai study demonstrated that pages with the lowest bounce rates had start/render times ranging from 0.9 to 1.5 seconds! Start/render time is the moment when content begins to render in the browser and "is a strong metric for measuring the user-perceived performance of a page...and how long visitors are willing to look at a blank screen before they being to leave a site." In today's market, mobile and table users have expectations that are almost identical as desktop users!

A data point that makes the case is this: regardless of platform (desktop, tablet or mobile) users have shared expectations for load times (time for pages to load in a user session) of between 1.8 to 2.7 seconds. Load times effect peak conversion rates (users taking action, like purchasing something). So, minimally you have to think of mobile devices as first points of contact, with many visitors forming their first impressions via mobile devices and then spending more quality time and making most purchases on desktop devices (i.e. browsing vs. shopping). Compare peak conversion rates by platform:



Source: *The State of Online Retail Performance, Spring 2017*

Yes, you've got to cover all the bases and you have to be mobile optimized.

Navigation

Navigation is the principle of enabling visitors to your site to quickly and easily get around your web site and find what they want. Sounds obvious, right? The first rule of thumb is making it intuitive: that is, make sure they can easily find the main things most visitors are looking for. That's why the general practice is to have a navigation bar with tabs or buttons that represent the main subject areas on your site.

These work like the index in a book: it's a quick way to find and then get to what you're trying to find. These are generally in a main navigation bar across the top of the page, or occasionally listed vertically on the left side. Another industry practice is to try to keep the selections (tabs) in the main navigation bar to eight. You can push up to ten if there's good reason, but after that you're putting up too many choices and creating confusion.

When these are built into one long page, you are consciously making your visitors scroll down the entire page to find out if what they are looking for is there. That can get confusing, and that can cause frustration and abandonment itself. Then there's the additional complication of the long page: if you don't want to pack all your content onto a single long page, you have to create sections with links out of each section to their own pages. Now you're forcing your visitors to navigate that complexity to find what they're looking for.

When making the decision about a web design with a main navigation bar containing tabs that link to specific pages (versus a single long page with sections that may or may not link to other pages) consider this: when you look at a table of contents for a book, a quick scan tells you all the major subject areas. That's how the tabs or buttons in a main menu bar work. When I see **Home | Music | Videos | Tour | Store | Press | Bio** it's pretty easy to know if what I'm looking for is covered and how to get there.



The way web pages are displayed for mobile devices is changing how web sites are designed, but there are tradeoffs. The traditional structure of a main nav bar at the top of each web page also has the advantage of carrying across all pages on the site. The single long page does make it easier to build the site for mobile devices, but also adds a new type of complexity to the site and can compromise functional design.

Page Selection

The most important design decision involves the **Home** page, because that's where visitors and fans land when they go to your site, and that is the page that is key to building your brand image. So, don't skimp on overall site design and especially home page design. You want good messaging and imagery to

grab attention get visitors to stay and create a favorable impression. Then the decision follows: what are the other pages? The most common are:

Bio: this is the background story for you or your band—here you tell the story of who you are.

Music: a page devoted to helping fans learn more about your music—more than just hearing samples, and also a great place to post lyrics.

Videos: this is an option which has high value for building fans, but also needs good quality video.

Tour: can be call Shows or Calendar, and lays out your schedule of gigs—ideally with links to buy tickets.

Store: today you need a full function store to sell all your physical and digital products—at full retail

Press: Here's where you tell your story to industry and have photos to download for promo purposes

Photos: Here's another functional decision point—do you have a photo page that could take a long time to load, or spread photos across the site?

Contact: Make it easy for visitors to become fans and sign up for your mailing list

You can see how easy it is to get a lot of main pages, and how confusing that can be. If you feel you need more than eight main tabs (pages) then start thinking about how to consolidate and create sub-categories in the navigation bar that lead to individual pages.

There may be other pages—for example, if you also teach guitar or another instrument, if your build specialty instruments, you would want that as a separate page.

You can see from above just how fast you get to eight pages!



Pictures and Videos

As pointed out above, do you have a separate **Photos Page**, or spread the photos across your Home page and other main content pages? That's a design decision, and one consideration is that having all photos on a single page make the page take longer to load—an issue for mobile devices on sketchy networks.

If you choose to have a Photos page, make sure it works for you and gets good fan engagement. You do that with layout until you get to the point that you have a lot of photos, then you should think about categories—organizing photos in galleries. These could include:

Performing Photos: live photos of you or your band playing at gigs

Personal Photos: these are photos of you or band members at practice or doing cool things, that help build connections to your fans.

Artwork: here's an opportunity to expand the fan connection through another creative avenue, whether it's posters, album covers, or other forms of art.

Fan Photos: here you collect photos of you with fans, and pictures of fans at your gigs.

Another important decision is having a **Video Page**. It's important because it's a great way to keep fans on your site, to build deeper bonds with them outside of live gigs, and really helps turn fans into superfans!

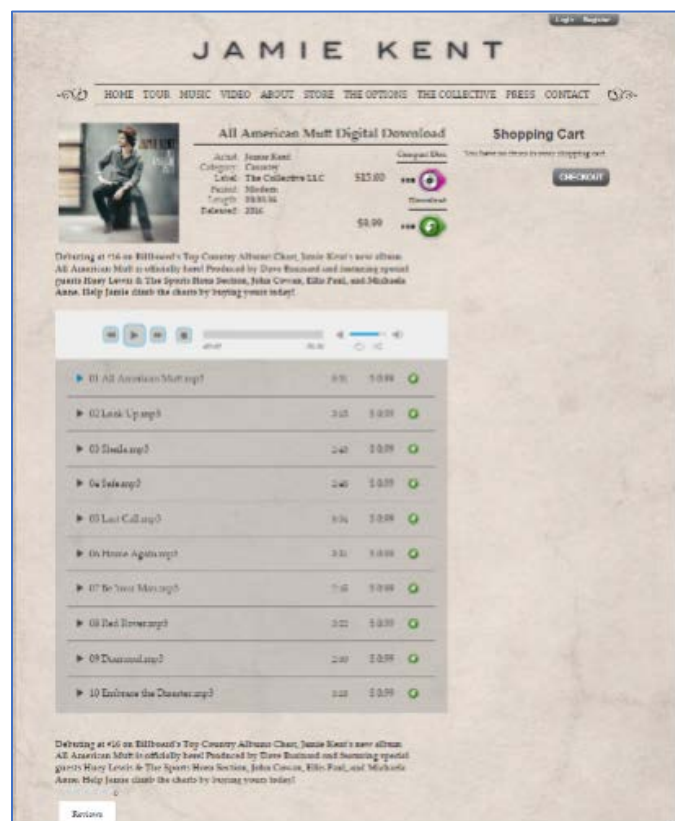
An early decision point is if have your videos posted on your website to be downloaded to and played on your visitor's device. That means more memory consumed on your site and could increase your hosting charge, and it also means there's risk of download complications due to bandwidth and latency. On the other hand, they're on your site not somewhere else. That's the problem with loading your videos to YouTube—yes, it's incredibly popular and there's a YouTube app, but visitors linking to YouTube to watch your videos have left your site. Now they're at YouTube getting pinged by dozens of ads and distracted about watching other videos. Also, you have no control over the quality of the videos that are posted on YouTube. One positive about YouTube is when it comes to mobile devices: you can embed the YouTube video image on your web page, and it will be easier and faster to play from a mobile device. But don't forget you are sending your visitors to another web site!

Your Store

In today's web and e-commerce environment the first thing you have to think about when adding a Store is the reality that your fans don't just buy your music—they also most certainly shop at iTunes or Google Play or Amazon, etc. In other words, they have expectations about how e-commerce for music should work from having done business with the big guys.

Specifically, what does that mean? First off, it means being able to sell physical and digital products. There's not much point in having your own store if you have to send your fans elsewhere to buy downloads and all you sell is CDs. You need a complete offering, and that includes merch.

In all cases that means a Product Info page for each item that offers pictures and full descriptions and in the case of an album offers a complete track listing and track samples for each track.



Displaying tracks and album format options helps visitors decide to buy a track or two or buy the whole album. Which makes the point: you need to be able to sell CDs, vinyl and downloads (different formats) off a single page for each album. Additionally, you need to be able to sell the full range of merchandise and combine physical sales with digital sales. Selling water bottles or posters is one thing, but if you're selling clothing you have to be able to cover gender and sizes, and that means your store software has to be able to handle variants (gender x size x colors).

Finally, when you're selling downloads, you need an e-commerce software that not only makes the sale for you, but also delivers the files to the customer in ready-to-play format. Sending Zip files or a list of links that the fan has to download and save doesn't cut it anymore. Matching the big guys translates into a download manager to transfer and save files after purchase, and in the case of Apple mobile devices also includes a music player that will play those files outside of iTunes and Apple Music.