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Is Your Site Performing?

5 Techniques
for Auditing Digital Health

When it comes to complex platforms, prevention is the best medicine for user and technical problems. Since digital ecosystems are becoming increasingly complex, monitoring and diagnosing potential issues is key to preventing more serious problems down the line.

Having a digital platform that's functional and intuitive is extremely important for offering a customer experience that will drive lead generation, convert into sales, and build loyalty towards your organization. Beyond ensuring that your organization's digital platform offers an excellent experience to users, regularly monitoring or auditing your site can also help you stay in compliance with evolving laws, and can help you mitigate any potential security issues before they become a real concern.

There are numerous different cross-sections of a site that need to be audited on a regular basis to give you a holistic view of your digital platform and its health. These are content, user experience (UX), accessibility, security, and technical structure. As new pages are added, as code is updated, and as standards evolve, it's critical to have an auditing process in place to diagnose any potential problems before they can cause any serious issues for your organization.
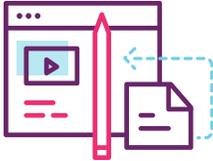
Content Audit
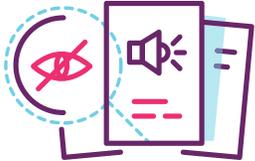
Accessibility-Specific Audits

User Experience (UX) Audit

Security Audit

Technical Audits

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What's an audit?

When spoken of in a digital context, an audit is a study of a specific facet of a platform. While some audits (such as accessibility audits) measure a component of the platform against compliance standards, others simply create an inventory and identify any gaps or redundancies.

Auditing is a very valuable process for organizations, but it's important before you begin to commit to following through on your findings. As part of the audit, you'll generate a written report of your strengths, weaknesses, and areas that need to be addressed. While it might be tempting to soften some of the findings, it's important to be honest, and to make a plan for fixing the problems you find. Otherwise, the audit is a pointless exercise. The entire point of an audit is to identify problem areas and solve those issues. Without follow through, the time spent on an audit is essentially wasted.

Why audit?

Although it may sound scary, audits are actually incredibly useful. They're designed to help you identify flaws or weaknesses in your digital platform, and improve both it and your customer experience. Audits are a fantastic diagnostic tool that can provide different insights and data to help you optimize every component of a platform. When used right, audits can help you map a plan for building a better digital platform to energize both your customers and your team.

With that in mind, here are the five different types of site audit strategies, their purposes, and how they can help you.

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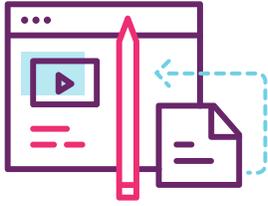
Content Audit

A content audit is an analysis of all of the content your organization has on its digital platform. Since a platform can span a website, social media, and even apps, a content audit can seem like a daunting undertaking. Ultimately, though, performing a content audit will help you improve the user journey by identifying where content is old, outdated, or even missing entirely on your website.

As part of a content audit, you'll not only work with your content marketing stakeholders, but you'll map out your Information Architecture and catalogue every piece of content you have. It's a big task, but there are plenty of tools that can help with the process, and it's invaluable for any organization that wants to make the most of their existing resources.

Organizations can do content audits on their own, or hire outside contractors to come in and assist. Bringing in fresh eyes ensures that problem areas will be identified without bias, and there are groups that specialize in running content audits and generating a roadmap of ways that organizations can dramatically improve the user journey on their website.

Here's what happens in a content audit:

- First, the auditor will take inventory of the content you currently have. This will likely be done by using a tool to map every URL on your website.
- Next, the auditor will look through each page on your site to identify the function of each piece of content. They'll log everything, including any problems they find. Does a page have outdated language? Is a page broken? What step in the sales or support journey does a piece of content correspond to? These are the things that will be recorded.
- The audit findings will be used to map out the customer journey on your website. You'll be able to see which piece of content corresponds to which stage in the buying process, and you'll be made aware of any gaps, or areas in which you can improve.

User Experience (UX) Audit

User Experience (UX) audits are an analysis of the usability of your digital platform. The UX audit seeks to understand which parts of your platform are causing problems, and can help you identify ways to updating your user experience.

A UX audit looks at numerous areas to build a picture of how your site is performing. During a UX audit, you'll use a variety of different tools to amass and assess data on your traffic and engagement, sales goals, conversion metrics, compliance with various UX standards, and will measure that against intangibles like your existing business and user objectives.

Different UX audits might focus on different areas of your organization's digital platforms. There are some kinds of UX audits that overlap heavily with accessibility-specific audits, which we'll cover further down. Ultimately, the goal of a UX audit is to ensure that your website doesn't get in its own way.

During a UX audit, you can expect the following things to happen:

- The auditor will identify the pages you plan to audit. An ambitious UX audit will look at more pages, but at the very least, a basic UX audit will identify and inspect your most important landing pages.

- The audit itself will focus on reviewing your text, keywords, and calls to action. Is the page easy to read? Are the calls-to-action clear? Has all the important metadata (such as page title, meta description, image descriptions, and so on) been filled out? An auditor will also look at the flow of information, and how the page performs across different devices and browsers.

- Once an auditor has looked at multiple pages on your site, patterns should begin to emerge. The UX auditor will identify areas of weakness that you can improve by comparing the findings from different pages, and make a plan for addressing those problems.
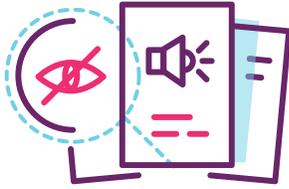
Accessibility-Specific Audits

Does your digital platform support web users with specific needs? An accessibility audit will help you ensure that your organization is serving every user equally— regardless of different levels of physical or mental ability that those users may have. There are quite a few social and business drivers for having a fully accessible website, and an accessibility audit will help you understand the many ways that your business can improve.

Accessibility audits are incredibly important for any business that cares about all its users, or that wants to go beyond the minimum compliance with the law. A proper accessibility audit will pinpoint the ways that technical best practices can increase your site performance, and will help you identify content creation workflows that simplify life for both your users and your team.

Even if you think you're fully accessibility compliant, we strongly recommend that you contract an organization to inspect your site and systems. Web accessibility is an area of legal liability: in 2017, the first federal trial on web accessibility found grocery chain Winn-Dixie's in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). An accessibility audit can identify areas in which your website needs improvement, and can help protect your organization from expensive litigation.

It's important to know that an accessibility audit can be more complicated than a content or UX audit. But a basic accessibility audit might look at the following:

- Review images on your website. Do they all have image tags?
- Do your links have descriptive text about where they lead?
- Is your text (with H1s, H2s, and so on) properly formatted?
- Is your site readable for users with color impairment? This might account for buttons, image or text contrast, and so on.

For any organization interested in checking and maintaining their content accessibility, the Web Accessibility Initiative has a toolkit called the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). The WCAG helps organizations gauge and address issues on an ongoing basis to make sure that no user is alienated.

Security Audit

A security audit doesn't only look at your existing platform and any vulnerabilities it may have. Security audits also seek to understand your existing security policies, procedures and systems, and will help you design practical, everyday practices that can keep your organization from developing vulnerabilities.

Frequent and thorough security audits are critical for any organization that handles data of any sort. A security audit can make sure that your data is as safe as possible, and can help you mitigate problems should a data breach occur. A security audit can also help you navigate security certifications, and understand roles and responsibilities when it comes to protecting your users' and your organization's sensitive information.

With a security audit, it's especially important to contract a specialist to assist you, and to follow any recommendations they provide. For example, look no further than the 2017 Equifax hack, where more than 145 million people's sensitive information was jeopardized. Security researchers had alerted Equifax to their vulnerabilities more than six months before the hack occurred, but inaction from Equifax left the site wide open to an inevitable hack.

In addition to protecting your users, security audits are important tools for making sure that your digital platforms are in compliance with the law. With the rise of hacking and vulnerability scandals, more and more legislation is being written around the protection of data and digital systems. A security audit will help you identify and address any vulnerabilities on your platforms. In the meantime, to make sure your site is secure as possible, it's always a good idea to:

- Make sure all of your systems are updated.

- Delete any user accounts that are no longer in use.

- Make sure all of your passwords are strong.

- Contact a company like FFW to run a security scan to make sure your site is safe.

Technical Audits

Technical audits are a great strategy for improving site performance. Technical audits can be a catchall term that refer to surveying and determining management for frontend, backend, and server configurations, both individually and as part of a larger collective strategy.

It doesn't matter how great your business model or content strategy is if your digital homebase is clunky and unreliable, or even just slower than your competition. In fact, there have been **plenty of studies** showing that a slow website will severely harm your conversion rates. A technical audit can help you improve speed, reliability and recovery, by identifying ways for you to better adhere to best practices in application architecture and content management.

A technical audit will look at your systems, automations, your code, and your infrastructure. It's very difficult for organizations without deep technical expertise to conduct a technical audit, so it's recommended to contract a group that has extensive experience surveying a platform's systems and architecture. During the technical audit process, you'll be able to identify:

- Any server issues, page problems, or technical errors.
- Potential architectural problems that might be slowing page load times.
- Areas of vulnerability that hackers might be able to exploit.
- That all systems are installed and configured properly.

At the end of a technical audit, you'll have a list of concrete areas that need to be addressed, and an audit organization will provide you with a list of steps that you can take to resolve any technical issues on your platform.

After the Audit

Auditing a system is just the first step in building a better digital strategy. Regardless of whichever kind of audit (or audits) you choose to undertake, it's important to identify and involve stakeholders as early as possible in the process, and make sure they're committed to follow-through on designing and implementing a strategy that addresses your audit findings.

In addition, an audit is only effective if you understand why your findings are important. Take the time to understand best practices in your industry and in the digital space, and don't be afraid to dig down. Ask questions and do as much research as you can: after all, you can't fix something if you don't know it's broken in the first place.

Lastly, remember that Rome wasn't built in a day. Even if you run every kind of audit and build and implement a digital strategy, it will take time for your platform to improve, and you need to monitor your site on an ongoing basis. As platforms and the web evolve, so too do audits and best practices, so keep auditing in your toolbox as an important part of measuring the effectiveness of your digital platform.

Ultimately, audits should be the first step in building a larger strategy for getting customers and leads engaged. Even the audits that focus on technical performance are important for improving your end-user experience, since an audit might turn up an unexpected way to make the browsing experience on your website better. Having a website that's functional and intuitive is extremely important to building a better digital presence for your business, and audits are just one way to ensure that your platforms are constantly performing at levels that exceed ordinary standards.

About Us

FFW is a digital agency focused on creating digital experience platforms that ensure our clients' success, always moving forward at the speed of digital innovation.

For over 15 years, the world's largest brands have relied on us to build accessible, creative, and user-friendly digital solutions that deliver results. We are more than 420 people across 11 countries, with a track record of over 1,000 digital solutions delivered since 2000.

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