WEBSITE, CMS, SEO... OH MY!

The answers to the questions you've been too hesitant to ask.

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Website Questions – Answered

Introduction

Websites, CMS platforms and SEO can raise a lot of questions, and "Googling" for answers can often lead to even greater confusion with contradicting tips and best practices. In this eBook, and the corresponding webinar "Websites, CMS, SEO, Oh My!", we break down those questions and answer them for the specific needs of the financial services industry. Whatever stage your website is at, whether it's a couple of days old or a couple of years old, see if you're making the right moves to stay up-to-date on the constantly changing needs of your users.

Our Manager of Media & Strategy, Melanie Coleman, and our Web Development Manager, Matt Larrabee, dive deep into best practices for your web presence, hosted by Account Coordinator, Jordan Julio. Below is the full transcript of the webinar, followed by our top tips and takeaways for each question.

Abbreviations to Know

SEO

SEO stands for search engine optimization, which is the practice of increasing the quantity and quality of traffic to your website through organic search engine results.

CMS

CMS, short for Content Management System, is a software application that helps users manage, edit and create content on a website without requiring programming knowledge. They often have drag and drop capability, allowing users to make layout changes, add content components (images, copy, video, etc.) and instantly see the results.

Q&A

Jordan Julio (JJ): Hello everyone, welcome back to another edition of the Pannos Sessions. I am your moderator, former intern, current Account Coordinator, Jordan Julio.

Today I'm joined by CMS all-star, Matt Larrabee and SEO superstar, Mel Coleman and we're going to be chatting about some common questions on websites and SEO and how they integrate together, along with some common misconceptions. But before we get into that, and without further ado, I want to give the floor to Mel and Matt to do some introductions... Matt.

Matt Larrabee (ML): That was a spiffy intro, I like it. I am Matt Larrabee, I'm the Web Development Manager at Pannos. I've been here 13 years so a good chunk of my life but I do all things websites, so really from the ground up building the front-end build, the back-end build, and everything in between.

Mel Coleman (MC): Good chunk of your life that's a great way to describe that, and I'm Mel Coleman, I'm the Manager of Media and Strategy for Pannos. So, I do all things paid, organic digital, traditional media, and SEO which is one of my favorite, I don't want to say pastimes, but it is one of my favorite things to get involved with because unlike paid media, it's not as straightforward. There is more of an art to it, obviously very much science and data-driven. So that's what's really fun and challenging about it.

JJ: Absolutely, 13 years Matt, 13 years ago I was in elementary school, so you have quite the background. So that's great, but just getting right into it. First question I have is,

How often should you redo your website, and why?

ML: I mean I can start with that, definitely if you Google "when I should redo my website", you'll see like two to three years and that's really because that's the life cycle of technology on the web. So, if you create a website, you don't really touch it for three years, your competitors are going to be doing laps around you just because technology has changed so much in that three years. We build websites completely different from year to year just because of the technology changes so that's what Google will give you. But in real life there's a better question to ask and that's how your website is performing. So, your website really can be fresh, a newborn babe right out of the box, and it can be performing terribly not leading to any conversions not taking advantage of what a website can do, or it can be three years and still running well, doing what you need it to do. So, it's really more of a question of how it's performing and what's out there that you can do.

MC: And I love that too, thank you for touching on conversions because I think a big hurdle that financial institutions in general, and that's of all sizes, have to get over is that their website is not a check box it's not like "okay I have it and I'm done and it's going to do all the things," it needs to be built for the external audience and that external audience's needs and demands of websites change so frequently. Largely, what they expect is driven by what retailers in the space are doing, so blame Amazon for all of our problems. Though I love it and always have a full shopping cart, they are the reason that we do have to redo and revisit our websites constantly because they are forever increasing the benchmarks and the consumer expectations of what they can expect online.

JJ: Right, and a lot of it's just having that forethought as a financial institution to look at where you are now and where you want to be moving forward because competition can make or break you, especially with something as complex but something that's so universally used as a website. That actually parlays me perfectly into my second question which is,

What are some things to consider when choosing a CMS especially one for the long term?

ML: And that's a super important question because you can really shoot yourself in the foot if you if you go with a CMS that doesn't have the capabilities that, not that you need right now, but that you're going to need in the next three to five years. So that's really what you have to think about when picking a CMS is not where your company is at right now but how you want to grow and what you want to be doing in a few years. So right now, you might not be doing any marketing automation, you might not be doing any personalization or really even using data at all on your website, but if you want to grow in the next few years, if you want to get into that you need to start thinking about the CMS now and start preparing for those steps up front.

MC: You stole my thunder, so thank you Matt, but I mean again this goes back to it and we run into this a lot I would say, where people are like "oh no I just need a simple WordPress site right now because we're just trying to get through xyz and we just know our old site isn't great right now, so we just want something a little new." This is the opportunity for you to revisit what your plans are as an institution moving forward because this is a growth vehicle for you whether or not you choose to view it that way - that's what it is. Especially in this kind of new hybrid world where everyone is some kind of a blend of remote or in-person, it means that your community is no longer geographically defined, so it's how you are reaching and engaging people as they leave that geographic footprint that'll really dictate and be dependent upon the CMS capabilities you choose when you're doing that website project. And Matt, I just need you to explain real quick, we've had a few conversations where some institutions don't think they need a CMS, so can you just explain,

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Why a CMS is needed?

ML: Definitely, to me it's almost a little comical when institutions say that, just because CMS's have been around for so long and it's really been a while since non-CMS or static sites have even been around in the industry, but there's really so many benefits of a CMS. For one, if you're a bank it's going to offer a lot of compliance needs that you have: a version history, a published queue and workflow, things like that. Definitely, being able to track all the actions on the site, who logs in, whatever gets updated, but also using that data that we're talking about, a static site it's not going to be able to use really any of that data. Then also just ease of use, so if you have team members on your site and maybe there's somebody who's a mortgage lender but also a commercial lender and you want them in two groups with the ability to only update their rates, with the CMS you'd only update those in one spot they'd update throughout the whole site, you're not going to have to find it in each page like a static website and make updates. And just from experience, I mean I've been making websites for 20 plus years, I won't date myself too much, but back in those days when it was static websites it was such a hassle to manage especially larger sites when there's a lot of updates, it just gets overwhelming really quickly.

MC: And I would have to say too, from a staffing perspective, a lot of the institutions that we work with are always saying "Hey we have a really small team," well you know your c-suite or your board is always nickel and diming the marketing team, you want a CMS that's intuitive that could be a WYSIWYG editor, "What you see is what you get," where it's similar to a Word functionality where you know what you can bold and what your headline options are. If it's all kind of laid out for you can feel more confident to own it and not have to always outsource if you don't have a developer or a programmer on staff. So, I mean that's not even from the security standpoint from all of the kind of record keeping that you'll need to do for FDIC audits but just from a staffing perspective. If you're not ready to take a developer on in-house or pay for a freelancer or an agency you need to make sure that the CMS you choose is something that you can manage at your kind of expertise level.

JJ: Right and a lot of it, I mean the future of marketing is data-driven and having something where you can track that data on your site is going to put you at such an immense advantage as a financial institution and there's a legitimate argument that data is the new oil, and so if you track that data and you have it that's just going to see your return on investment go to the moon for the most part because it's going to help you figure out where you are, where you want to be, it helps you to develop strategy and, you know, just keep moving ahead against your competitors which is what every FI wants . So, Mel I'm gonna ask a question and please don't get mad, but,

What do I really need to do for SEO, and does it even really matter?

MC: I won't get mad, maybe. No, so I mean if you have been in marketing in any capacity for the past 20 something years, you've heard about SEO. There's always kind of the inflammatory articles like "Is SEO dead," but for as long as there is going to be search engines, SEO will be a thing. So, if you follow Google, you know that they make algorithm updates to search every single day, they make major ones a few times a year, and then they make massive shifts every few years. And all of these directly impact the amount of traffic and the amount of conversions that you get to your site. We do know, not quite definitively, but you know I'll stake my career on it, you're going to get about 80% of your traffic and conversions from organic search or direct, that's people who are choosing to become a member or a customer through your website. That's not just on Google but that's also on Bing, that's on Yahoo, that's on DuckDuckGo, that's people typing into Chrome, you know, www.xyzbank.com and that's really due to the brand strength that only happens when people have exposure to you.

So, SEO will never be dead, in fact it's never been more complex, thank you Google again for that, and that's really because there's so many components to it. We tend to liken it to a car where, you can buy a car just like if you've launched a site and you've built it to the latest and greatest standards you've done all of the right things. So, your car's working great everything's awesome. You drive it off the lot it's already depreciated in value and that's because the moment you launch it things are already changing. So, what is your plan in the next month? And with technical standards you can be fine for a little while, as they don't change drastically from day to day, but content does. The difference is that technical standards need to be kept up with, same with like an oil change, changing your brake pads, because are you uploading images to the right size, are all of those optimized, every time you upload an image do you have alt text or meta descriptions, whenever you're uploading content, again, what are those back-end data points that you're using to make sure that search engines know exactly what's on your site. Is that content written for the external user, are you answering questions for Gen Z and Gen Y, or are you still focused on talking to the current core of your entire customer base which, is likely around 50 years old or older. And that's really where we start to talk about what are your growth goals over the next five years, which is going to have to include appealing to Gen Z and Gen Y, which means that you have to change the way that you talk. That happens on your website because these two generations are the most knowledgeable, the most educated and the least likely to trust you at your word. They're going to research to the nth degree, they're going to look at all of your competitors they're going to see what everyone in this space is saying. So, if you're not saying anything and if you haven't touched content since you drove that car off the lot you're behind, and people aren't going to trust you just because you have this institutional "Hey we're a bank" that's not going to fly anymore. So that's really where the car metaphor tends to make the most sense because if you don't keep up with these things your new car can really become kind of a lemon pretty quick.

JJ: Right. And you know as the unofficial spokesperson for Gen Z at Pannos, you're right with saying that there is a ton of pressure on financial institutions to reach users and audiences especially the future, which is my generation. And, you know, you could have all these great things but if you're not currently going to evolve , we're just going to move on because, you know I hate to say it, but a lot of loyalty is just not there as it used to be. But as community banks and financial institutions reach out and get there, they can hold on to my generation and then the generation after that, and after that, so that's something you want to keep in mind.

MC: I didn't like how quickly you excluded me from your generation, me and Matt are both like, "that's okay sitting right here." It's true, I focus a lot on content because technical stuff is easier than content and that's because technical just takes time. But content is more of an enigma. What do you think your users need to know? There's research that needs to happen, you need to be looking at what the trends are, you need to also look at where that content should be going, what form it should take – it's not just a 300 word blog up on your site anymore – get in front of a camera and then turn that into a quick blog, too. So, there's a lot of different components here, but content is really going to be the primary driver. But, it can't go anywhere if the technical things are all completely out of whack. Then you've just got nice leather interior with no wheels on a car, so you really need to make sure that structurally everything's in place but then you have to have content to make it go.

JJ: Right. And partly in this to Matt,

With regards to content and CMS, what are some things that financial institutions should be thinking about consistently?

ML: Definitely data is really the first thing you want to think about. So, I mean a rule of marketing is if you get the right content for the right people, you're going to have conversions. Kind of in the old days of websites you had to really pick your audience. You had to pick who you're going for and there's still some of that today. But with things like personalization and marketing automation, that's really changed so you can really speak to a lot of different audiences where they are on your website now instead of just reaching one audience.

One of the best examples of that is personalization on a site with life stages. Maybe you're reaching out to Gen Z's or younger people with education. We all know when you're first out of school you probably don't know much about financing, you're going to want that education, maybe also savings, checking, CDs, some of that early on investing, and things like that. So, you're gonna be able to track who's coming to your site and by their actions, you're going to be able to group them into this category. Then you can offer them specific content just for them, specific education just for millennials or maybe if we get into other life stages, we have a young family where you can gear it toward first time homebuyers and people who are just starting to think about retirement or saving up for some of those bigger purchases in life. And then you can move on to another life stage like retirement, offer them wealth management and investments in retirement options there. So it was really hard to do that with an old website and market to all three of those at the same time, now with personalization and data you can really capture who a user is and make the site personalized for specifically for them.

And I love to give an example kind of in real life. Let's say you're having a conversation with a friend and they're like "Oh I'm going to my grandma's 100th birthday this weekend on Saturday", any real person is going to keep track of that data that they have on that person so they're not going to go the next day and say "Oh hey can you babysit my kids on Saturday", that's going to be offensive and kind of off-putting. And that's how people are on the web these days too, so if they show interest for the first time in a mortgage, a first-time homeowner mortgage and then they come back to the website and you offer them retirement, they're going to get a bad sense about that, they're not going to love that especially the younger generation who's used to you tracking and knowing them a little better. So, a little rambling, but really that's where you need to think these days you need to take advantage of this data that's out there.

MC: I love that example though because, really like, that's the best example of personalization.

ML: That's kind of a weird example I just made it up.

JJ: It's good.

MC: I really like it though, because it's so true! You know like going back to Amazon who really, I think did this really, really well at scale, which is where you log in, and same with Xfinity or Google, like you never log out because you're never going to remember that password, so you just stay in. But they greet you with like a "Hey Mel" and "Check out the things that we have new today" and they're all going to be things based on your search history and that's what we all want to see. So, the challenge really for digital marketers, like myself, is that you know we're entering into a cookie-less world that'll be happening really in 2022 and you know there's a battle that's happening, there's a massive discussion around how do we continue personalization without the cookie. And a cookie, despite being delicious things in real life, are just snippets of code that allow us to determine where users go and what they're doing. That sounds creepy, and it can be, some users, some advertisers did not do well with it, but by and large it's given us all the creature comforts of what personalization is. It's the reason that you don't see, to Matt's point, like I'm not going to see retirement things or retirement homes or AARP ads, but I am going to see landscaping and how to engage your toddlers, things that really make sense to me but that's based off of cookies.

So, the challenge for banks in particular is that we have not been very good at capturing first party data and first party cookies are going to be fine, it's really what do you do and how do you engage with sites or with users who come to your site. Whenever they engage with you directly that's first party because that's you and this comes back to then what CMS do you have to be able to do that personalization with them, because that depending upon the CMS you have, you'll be able to remarket to them and to personalize within your site to do more intuitive cross-selling, anything to deepen the share of wallet. As we know, banking is much more of a service than product driven, which is a little bit of a change from what we've seen in the past. So how, as a service, do we continue to expand the relationship? I think that personalization is going to be a really critical driver of that, especially with younger generations.

JJ: 100% agree, that's a great, great description by both you, Mel and Matt, but you know my next question is, so I've done all this, I've put the content out, I've done everything, I feel, but I'm still not showing up on page one on Google or Bing or DuckDuckGo,

How does a website's content really help me bypass my competitors and become one, two or just on the first page in general?

MC: This question. The thing about being on page one, even being above the fold, being in the coveted number one position on page one of search is that Jordan, Matt, and myself could be sitting in the literal same room, same wi-fi network, same location, all of the same things, we could be using the same device, we could all search for the exact same thing and we would get three different search result pages. And that's contingent upon the fact that Google knows search is built for the end user. So just because I'm really interested in knowing what the best schools are near me, as my kids are entering in kindergarten, Jordan does not want to see that. So, Google wants Jordan to continue to trust them, so Google is going to show Jordan things that make sense for him, such as best post-grad schools. So even if we were to say "Hey best coffee shops near me" Google would know that I'm a Dunkin fanatic so they're going to show me primarily likely Dunkin sources. Jordan, maybe, Dunkin also has a very high rating, it's very trustworthy, the largest, but he may also see the one that he tends to frequent and maybe that's like some kind of a local coffee shop.

JJ: Right.

MC: He may see that based off of his behavior, and I think that's always the disconnect which is just because you're doing the right things, know that you are competing with every other bank in the space. So, how are you going to differentiate? And that really comes down to the quality of your content, not just checking a box and saying I answered this question, but truly what are you trying to achieve with that content, and you don't have to be on page one to be found. So that's where there's a whole other back linking structure and it's trying to make sure that that content is pushed onto other mediums that are a little bit less competitive, outside of search.

JJ: Right, well, that's all the questions I had today. Thank you to Matt and Mel for joining us and if you like to reach out, the emails are
- Jordan – jjulio@pannosmarketing.com
- Mel – mcoleman@pannosmarketing.com
- Matt – mlarrabee@pannosmarketing.com

Thank you everyone and have a good day!

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Top Tips & Takeaways

How often should you redo your website, and why?

You should update your website every two to three years because technology is constantly changing and you need to keep up with your competitors. It needs to be built for the external audience and that external audience's needs and demands of websites change frequently. Largely, what they expect is driven by what retailers in the space are doing, so their advances will dictate overall website trends.

Rather than focus on the age of your website, however, performance is really what should be analyzed when considering a new website. Your website really can be fresh, right out of the box, and it can be performing terribly not leading to any conversions, not taking advantage of what a website can do, or it can be three years and still running well, doing what you need it to do.

What are some things to consider when choosing a CMS especially one for the long term?

Look at a CMS as a growth tool - what can it do for you now and also in the future - and choose a CMS that does not just meet your needs right now, but can also meet future needs. Knowing the growth goals for your FI, as well as your technology roadmap, will help to identify what the important elements will be.

For Example:
- Will your site need to have personalization in the next 3-5 years? If so, what level of personalization is needed?
- Do you have (or are you implementing) a CRM that needs to connect seamlessly?
- Are you leveraging marketing automation through a third party, or looking for a CMS that can do so?

Why is a CMS needed?

While there are many benefits to having a CMS, one of the top is the ease of use. For small marketing teams (or teams of one) that wear a lot of hats, having to rely on updating code or reaching out to a freelancer for even minor updates can be frustrating and time consuming. When there are a lot of updates, it can get overwhelming very quickly.

Additional Benefits:
- It's going to offer a lot of compliance needs that you have: a version history, a published queue and workflow, being able to track all the actions on the site, who logs in, whatever gets updated, and ease of use because no coding is required.
- Ability to track all the actions on the site, including who logs in and what gets updated (when and by who).
- User groups can be established, meaning that users can be limited to certain sections of the site and certain permissions. For example, if someone in the mortgage department needs to be able to update rates, they would have the ability to edit mortgage rates and nothing else on the site.
- A one-to-many relationship that means you can update something in one place and it is automatically updated across the site. For example, updating a rate in the rates table will also update the rate in the disclosure and any cross-sells where it is referenced.

What do I really need to do for SEO, and does it even really matter?

As long as there are search engines, SEO will matter, it's what drives organic traffic to your website. We know that, on average, you're going to get about 80% of your traffic and conversions from organic search or direct traffic. That's not just on Google but also on Bing, Yahoo, DuckDuckGo, and people typing a web address into their browser.

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It is important to consistently update your site to keep up with technical standards that change based upon technological advances and Google Algorithm updates, as well as ensuring you are regularly posting new content. That being said, content is more of an enigma. What do you think your users need to know? There's research that needs to happen, you need to be looking at what the trends are and what audience you're trying to reach. You need to also look at where that content should be going, what form it should take - it's not just a 300 word blog up on your site anymore - get in front of a camera and then turn that into a quick blog, too. So, there's a lot of different components here, but content is really going to be the primary driver. But, it can't go anywhere if the technical things are all completely out of whack.

With regards to content and CMS, what are some things that financial institutions should be thinking about consistently?"

A rule of marketing is if you get the right content for the right people, you're going to have conversions. In the old days of websites, you had to choose the one audience that you were going to speak to, or try to make it generic enough to work for everyone. While there are still a lot of sites like that today, with the right CMS and things like personalization and marketing automation, you can really speak to a lot of different audiences and you can offer specific content just for them. Today's users are accustomed to websites catering to them, remembering who they are and what they showed interest in, and your FI website can, and should, cater to that.

The challenge for banks in particular is that we have not been very good at capturing first party data, which is captured whenever a user engages directly with your website. This comes back to what CMS do you have and what are the personalization capabilities of that CMS. Depending upon the CMS you have, you'll be able to remarket to users and to personalize within your site to do more intuitive cross-selling and create a unique experience for each user. Personalization is going to be a really critical driver of not only gaining new customers or members, but also increasing share of wallet with those already have, especially with younger generations.

How does a website's content really helped me bypass my competitors and become one, two or just on the first page in general?

This really comes down to the quality of content and addressing user intent. With search engines using personalized search results, every user will be returned different results based upon their prior search history and their previous online behavior (i.e. what sites they visit, what content they interact with, etc.). Three people could be sitting in the exact same room, using the same WIFI, and using the same search terms, but they will see three different search results pages. Each person has different search characteristics, so content on your website needs to be relevant to what your customers are searching for.