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Summer Internship
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Summer Internship

This summer I was tasked with redeveloping an e-commerce website for Scott

McLaughlin's' hosting company, Heartland Hosting. The Website I redeveloped was for a client

named Mark Malmkar who sells model train cars, interior kits, small detail parts, and a variety of

other model train products. His business is named Palace Car Company and he lives and runs

this business in Oak Harbor Washington, so all communication was done via email and phone

calls. I was told to work exclusively with the client which was my first experience working with

a client in the website development business. Mark wanted to keep the same elements that are on

his current website except for adding a couple of new products that he wanted featured on the

home page. He has recently gotten into the world of nonfiction writing and published a couple of

books he would like featured on the website.

The internship was scheduled to start on June 1st, but a few weeks passed by and I had

not heard anything from Mark or Scott. Mark's sales on his website had been down 50% for the

past year, and he didn't feel that redeveloping his current website would be in his budget. He

plans on selling his business in 2024 and the new buyer may want to redesign the website

themselves. This was a discouraging message, and I wasn't sure what I was going to do to meet

the required hours for this internship. This experience provided me with an initial glimpse into

the website development business. It became clear very quickly that the schedule of website

development operates on a time frame that might not always align with mine. This experience

emphasized that this field demands a certain level of adaptability and flexibility, because projects

may unfold in ways that deviate from initial plans. Client interactions play a pivotal role in this

business because, at the end of the day, the clients hold all the decision-making power regarding when and if they alter their websites.

Scott and I attempted to meet various times to establish a new project but we both have very busy schedules and eventually found a time that worked for the both of us. When we met Scott told me that he had persuaded Mark to let me work on his website for this internship and that Mark wanted to proceed. This was good news to me, but I had lost about 3 weeks of time that I very well could have used to get hours in on this project. I got Marks's contact information and set up dates and times to make a call with him to introduce myself and to get a better grip on what he wanted done with his website. His current website is functional but outdated, especially in terms of e-commerce features that are available on the current WordPress systems. He informed me that he didn't mind the way the website currently looks, but trusted me to use my creativity. I kept most of the same elements and re-used the same color scheme. My first order of business was to add every single product that is on his current website into the WooCommerce products section in the new WordPress platform.

WooCommerce

WooCommerce is a WordPress plugin that allows you to turn a regular website into a fully functioning online store and includes all necessary e-commerce features. You can make product pages, keep track of inventory, and organize your products into categories. I haven't used an e-commerce plugin for WordPress, so I had to do some independent research to see how this powerful system worked. I started by creating all the categories so that when I added the products individually, I could categorize them when I published them instead of going back one by one and reorganizing them.

Organizing

Mark has a lot of products on his website. 248 to be exact. I knew that organizing these products was going to take some time and attention to get them into the right categories so visitors to the website could find what they were looking for as easily as possible. I began by creating a hierarchy system for all of the products. I followed the organization setup of the original website which had 7 parent categories to contain all of the products. Two categories do not belong to a hierarchy system which are titled Books and Featured Items. The names of the parent categories are HO Scale (by Car Type), HO Scale (by Brand Name), HO Interior Kits (Universal), Craftsman Kits, Individual Seating, S Scale Interior Kits, and finally Detail parts. Next, I created multiple categories under each parent category:

HO Scale (by Car Type)

- Coach Cars

- Combination Cars

- Diner Cars

- Dome Cars

- Observation Cars

- Parlor Cars

- Coach/Lounge

- Parlor/Lounge

- Sleeping Car

- Sleeper/Lounge Cars

- Lounge Cars

HO Scale (by Brand Name)

- Athearn

- Con-Cor

- Eastern Car Works

- International Hobby Corporation (IHC)

- Model Die Casting- Palace

- Model Die Casting- Harriman

- Model Power- Harriman

- Rivarossi

- Train station

- MDC- Old Time Cars

HO Interior Kits (Universal)

- Universal Core Kits

- Brass Core Kits

- Deluxe Core Kits

Craftsman Kits

- Amtrak California

- Pullman Cars

- Budd Cars

S Scale Interior Kits

- Sleeping Cars

Individual Seating

- HO Scale Seating

- N Scale Seating

- S Scale Seating

Detail Parts

- HO Scale Detail Parts

- Decals

Adding Products

Adding each product was tedious work. When adding a new product there are several checkboxes you need to fill. First the Product name. For this, I didn't change any of the names of the products I simply copied what was on Marks's current website. Next was the product description which I also gathered from the current website. I didn't change any of the descriptions besides fixing a couple of spelling errors here and there. After that, I added the product image. There were over 300 images in the media library so to track down each one I used the inspect feature on my computer to find the image source name and then searched my finding in the WordPress media library. Most images didn't have alternative text, so I wrote a short description under each one. Some products had more than one image, so I set the one main image and then added any other images used into the product gallery. Now that I had a title, description, and image, I could add the product to the categories I had already created. Almost every product showed up in multiple categories on the website. An example of this can be seen in Product #9685. The product title is "Con Cor Dome Sleeper/Lounge Observation Car". This product was added to 4 different categories. The primary category was Con-Cor. Once it is in this category it will also show up in the HO Scale (by Brand Name) since this is the parent category. The next 3 categories were Sleeper/Lounge cars, Dome cars, and Observation cars. This will show up in the parent category HO Scale (by Car Type) as well as each of the

subcategories. It was important to get all of the products categorized properly for all products to be accessible on the right page for the customer. After categorizing the product, you can add tags. For example, product #9865 could have tags such as Con-Cor, Dome Car, etc. After adding the tags, it was time to add the product data.

There are two different product types I used when adding products, simple products, and variable products. Simple products have no additional options when on the product page, you just add them to the cart. For these products I had to input the price, the SKU and then finally checked the "keep track of stock inventory" button and typed in how many were in stock. This took extra care and attention to ensure that all of the prices, SKUs, and stock numbers were correct and matched up with what was on the current website.

Variable products had a couple more hoops to jump through. An example of a variable product on Marks's website would be #5001 HO Scale Streamliner Coach Seats, which you can purchase in a package of 36 or a package of 100. When adding a variable product in WooCommerce you first add the SKU and how many are in stock. Next, I added an attribute, for this example, the attribute name was "Size". Then, under the values tab, I added the numbers 36 and 100 separated by a vertical bar symbol. This tells WooCommerce that there are two variables for this product. Next under the variations tab, I clicked generate variations, which generated the two possibilities for this product, 36 or 100. Under each variation, I edited the SKU and price. the package of 36 had a SKU number of #5001-36 and a price of $9.75 whereas the package of 100 had the SKU #5001-100 and was priced at $19.75. After Completing this the product data was complete. The only other information required for each product was Search Engine Optimization.

Yoast SEO

Yoast SEO is a plugin used in WordPress systems that aids web developers in optimizing their websites to show up in results on search engines. I have learned about this plugin in Scotts WordPress classes, so I was familiar with how it operates. For each product I added I also included Key phrases, SEO titles, Slugs, and Meta descriptions. Yoast SEO is helpful because it analyzes your optimization techniques immediately. Each product has a unique key phrase that is related to the product title. This SEO plugin can be picky, as it wants you to make sure the key phrase is in the meta description, product title, and description of the product. The SEO title for products was the product name as well as the site title. For the Slug I used the product title with dashes instead of spaces and no capital letters for it to be web-friendly. For the Meta description, I edited the product descriptions so they would fit the required character count. After completing the SEO for each product, it was time to publish them. Once a product is published it is live and will show up on your website under its respective category. After every product was accounted for, I could start designing the new website.

Design

I wanted this website to have a clean, polished, and official look. I reused the same color scheme from the original website, which was Navy, Gold, and White. Mark mentioned that he didn't mind the aesthetic of his current website so to try and incorporate some vintage feel I used a gold ridged border around sidebar menus, customer login pages, and various elements. These borders reminded me of old picture frames that I think suit the website well. I also added a border shadow which gave these elements some dimension. The header of the Website is a navy blue banner with the logo aligned to the left. It also includes the company name in gold with white text shadowing in the center to make it pop. The header also includes the URL in the lower

right section of the header. I also included a gold-rigged header divider to transition into the main body of the page and to follow the same theme as the borders on the other elements. I followed the original website in terms of alignment and content on the pages.

I used the Divi builder for all header and page building. The Divi theme builder allows you to create one header that is shown across all pages. I also created a global body so that each page has the same feel, spacing, and alignment. Each page has a vertical menu that is aligned to the left. It has options to go to the home page, Catalog page, Order page, Contact page, About us Page, and Links Page. Under the menu, I included an image that includes all payment options since it was also included on the original website. On the right side of all pages is a search bar for customers to browse products and anything they want to find quickly. It also includes a customer login element as well as a shopping cart element that shows how many products are in the shopping cart as well as the subtotal of those items. The Final element on the right sidebar is a monthly news column that has a text box. Each of these elements is uniform in style and has the same border styling as previously mentioned. After the global styles were saved, I could begin putting content on individual pages.

Home Page

For the Content on the individual pages, I reused the text and elements from the original website. On the top of the home page, I added an H1 tag that says, "Precision HO-Interior Model Railroad Kits". Beneath that, there is a short description that tells site visitors what types of cars he is selling. Under that, I added a WooCommerce shopping element. I then modified this element so it will only show the "Featured Items" category. I added three books Mark has written to this category, so they are the only products on the home page. Mark said he wanted to emphasize that he is now selling his nonfiction books, so he wanted them presented on the home

page. Under the featured products section there is a short paragraph that describes what Palace Car Co is about and why you should shop with them.

Changes

If I could redo something on this project, it would be retaking product images. The product images available for me to use were all the same size, 800 by 600 pixels. That is an alright size for looking at multiple products on a single page, but not if you are looking at a single product on a page. The products that Mark sells are incredibly detailed. From the model train cars themselves to the tiny interior detail parts like coffee urns for example. I think it would be beneficial for Mark to take new, high-resolution images to show clients the detail he puts into his products. Another problem with the current imagery is that they are not uniform at all. There are multiple different backgrounds for products. A lot of products have a blue and purple velvet-looking backdrop and some have a shiny gold background. When these products are side-by-side on a product page they clash with each other, and it doesn't look as professional as it could. Customers want to see clean detailed images when they are looking to purchase something. I know I'm more apt to buy something online if the product looks clean and professional rather than looking cluttered or unprofessional. Now obviously it isn't feasible for me to travel to Washington to take new product images and it also isn't feasible for Mark to send me one of every product he has. But in a perfect world, I think that's something that could take Marks's e-commerce site to a new level of professionalism.

Overview

All in all, this was a very good experience and a good way to dip my toes into the world of website design. I enjoyed speaking with Mark and getting experience working with a real client one-on-one. It was also beneficial to work on an e-commerce website and get some real-

world experience on how to manage inventory, add products to the catalog, and create shopping pages. I wish I had been able to start this project at the beginning of June as scheduled, but I understand that the timeframe in this industry is in the hands of the client, and it may not always align or work out the way you would like it to. it's up to Mark to decide on what alterations go on his website and I'm thankful that he reversed his decision in time for me to work on his website and complete my required hours. The shortened time frame was not ideal, especially with juggling a full-time summer job and other travel plans I had in July. I ended up needing all the time I had to complete my hours which took me up to the deadline for the summer internship.

After getting some experience with a real client I can say that I am intrigued about pursuing a job in the website design industry. In this industry, I don't think you can ever have enough education because there are always new cutting-edge technologies that can change or enhance the way you develop websites. If I were to pursue a job like this, I think I would need even more experience and continue my education independently to be a successful website designer. Nevertheless, I am grateful to have this opportunity and gain experience within the multimedia world. I'm looking forward to my last two semesters at UNK and excited for graduation so I can enter the real world.