The ideal artist's website

7 things to do, 2 things to avoid

Hello. I'm John Allsopp, I've been a marketer forever and a web developer and digital marketer since about 2000. And yes, I can't draw but I do love the creative arts (I'm a drummer also, fwiw). One day I put up an offer for free help with search engine optimisation and all those who responded were artists. Since then, I've been working to help artists get wherever they are going.

Many artists neglect their website, but it's really important. Here's my best advice for how to improve your website. Do one or all of them, let me know what happened.

1. Put your best image up front

Most people use a slideshow so people can just arrive to your website and get a sense of your work straight away.

Auto-scrolling is fine, just don't make it too fast. 8 seconds is about right.

For extra points, make this a slideshow of your upcoming exhibitions. So it's still a slideshow of your images, but say you're exhibiting portraits at one place then you'll show a portrait image that's going to be at the exhibition, then bottom left the title of the show, the location and the dates.

Do check it on a mobile device, all sorts of things can go wrong. Your headline may obscure the image. The cropping might not work .. choose images where the 'action' is in the centre. Check what happens if someone turns their mobile to landscape.

Get rid of as many distractions as you can from that initial image.

Use high quality images.

If you are not using exhibitions as your slideshow, maybe make a link like [more paintings] or [more landscapes]. That says to Google that the page you are linking to is about paintings or landscapes, so that helps you rank in search for that. It's also pretty good navigation for the user who likes what they see and wants more.

If someone scrolls down, I would just have a short 'about' text and a picture of you.

2. Improve your 'about' page

Imagine this is the start of a romantic relationship. You want to appear nice, attractive, friendly perhaps. Basically, your goal here is to provide enough information for people to model you.

What do I mean? Evolutionarily, we needed to be able to decide whether a new person is a threat or an opportunity. We have very developed capabilities to 'model' people based on very little

information. It's the whole "people decide on you in the first two seconds of you walking into a room" thing. They'll judge how you look, but I also want you to talk about why you do what you do. That's because if you stand for, I don't know, environmental awareness, then ideally you want other people who stand for the same thing to discover you and support you. And you don't really want polluters and litterers to like you. You want to put-off some people. Let's come back to this.

Do have a picture of you, but not too many. Shy artists have no pic, and that makes it socially awkward if someone comes to an exhibition, they don't know if you are you. Also, when we are getting to know someone, we make a mental model of someone from very little information. If you provide your picture, it is likely to provide information about your gender, your age, and your demographic and geographic roots, and that helps people connect with you. An ideal picture would be you in your studio.

Some artists come across, however, as loving themselves and their lifestyle a little too much and possibly gatekeeping coolness. It can put people off if they feel they are going to get judged or won't come up to scratch. There's an exception here, if you're mixing with important people, with a higher echelon of cool people, and that's part of your appeal then obviously you have to give that impression.

So, one picture of you is enough. Unless your art is about you, then that's obviously a different thing.

If you want to be ultra friendly and nice, include an ultra friendly and nice video.

Friendly is a default position, but you may be something else. If you're aloof and Russian, and that's what makes you different, then of course, everything needs to support that idea. In marketing we call that 'brand voice'.

Somewhere early, we need to tackle geography. Certainly on your contact page you need to say where you are now, but if you are from somewhere else, then that's for your 'about' page. If place or ethnicity or culture plays a part in your art, we need to know, here, early on.

Consider including something about your process.

OK so let's dig deep. What makes you different? What do you add?

Deeper: why do you do what you do? What's the change you want in the world? How do you want people to change after they've seen your art? What action do you want to provoke in people?

That might need some work. People aren't used to thinking that way. But if you can find your greater purpose, it will attract people who want the same thing, and they'll follow you to the ends of the earth.

Keep it as short as possible. In the websites we reviewed, the more established the artist, the shorter was the 'about me' text. In trying to achieve that, you might want to create a downloadable CV so that all your past achievements and so on are there for anyone who might want it, but 'about' is about getting to know you.

3. A great footer

Weird, eh? But yes.

OK, four columns.

Column 1: how to get in touch. Your address (be sure to format that the same way every single time .. it's really important for local search engine optimisation). Include your country.

Column 2: links to the galleries where people can see your work.

Column 3: your social media links. Obviously you have to keep all these up to date. Retire any that you can't be bothered with any more or that don't work for you. It's OK to just concentrate on what works.

Column 4: art portals .. links to places where people can buy your stuff.

Underneath that, your copyright.

Make sure your pages end, so people can actually get to your footer.

And here's the thing .. print a page. Make sure that your address and contact details appear on your printouts (the links shouldn't).

4. Be clear what you want your website visitors to do / what they can do

Do you take commissions? What are your timings? What's buyable here? What price are we talking? What is that price for, a print or an original? Size. Framed/not.

Are you looking for commissions? New galleries? Residencies?

Might you give private tuition?

Basically .. over the whole site be clear about the next steps a visitor can take to progress their interest, and be clear about where you are headed and what you want next .. ask and you might receive.

5. Try a headline

Headlines are really big in marketing. A really good one will deliver exactly what you're about before even your image loads. So there's an opportunity here.

I was looking at an animal portrait artist's website and it said "animal portraits" as a headline which I thought was pretty good. Remember we are looking at this through search engine optimisation (SEO) eyes .. ideally we want you to be discoverable in Google by people who want what you do. So I thought 'animal portraits' worked.

In the SEO world, we have tools that show us how many people search for whatever search phrase. And it turned out that 1,300 people search for 'animal portraits' every month in the UK. Which is pretty cool.

Except. Every example picture was of someone's pet dog. So that's really what was going on. "Pet portraits" .. that has 5,400 searches every month in the UK. Four times the opportunity.

"Dog portraits", 2,900 searches.

I do accept the tension here. Perhaps artists want to be free to follow where their inclination takes them. Increasingly, no-one likes taking decisions because although it means saying yes to something, it also means saying no to something. We like to keep our options open. Where back in the day things would be arranged by letter-writing and couldn't be changed, now we can What'sApp seconds before an event and change our mind.

The idea of saying that you are a pet portrait artist, or a dog portrait artist may well irk this particular artist who, in their own time, painted highland cattle. It feels wrong to say you are one thing, to put up a front and then go and do something else. Especially to an artist, where the whole point is that everything aligns and nothing pollutes what you're doing.

It's worse than that. In the SEO world, we love long, very specific search phrases, because that tends to mean the searcher has some a few preparatory searches and is now clear what they want and they are ready to sign up or buy. Generally people want those people, not the tire kickers. So this tension about the specificity of the headline, it's a really big deal.

The best answer I've got for you is this. Even the grand masters took commission work to pay the bills. Your website is not you. It's what you are selling, to the people you are selling to. So if you have a website about you as a dog portrait artist, it's not stolen your soul like a Victorian photographer, it's just your shop window. It's not you. But it might enable you to be more you.

If it works, and you sell more stuff more efficiently and with less work, it could mean you get to spend whole days doing what you really want to do. That lets you be you, just more so. That's a good thing, right? And it's might be better than taking a job to pay the bills.

And ultimately, all we're really doing in the headline is efficiently telling people what you do in a way that filters away people who don't want that. So you get a steady stream of people who want what you do, wallets open.

And if it helps you get higher up Google's search for that, that's free traffic and sales.

You know what? It might be a good exercise for you to work out what you're really about, what you really offer people, and then try to get that into a short, snappy, motivating headline.

6. Make image details optional

Ideally, let people enjoy your work uncluttered. But then if they want to know whether they can buy it or have it printed on a pillow or whatever, that needs to be available.

Typically, you might provide that as a rollover.

OK, so first of all, decide what you're going to say about each image and be consistent. Usually Title, Media, Size. Price or sold might be good too, although I like adding a red dot to indicate sold. See if you can make the relevant field required, so you don't forget to fill it in.

Thing is, 'rollover' doesn't exist on mobile devices (over half your visitors), so check how your solution is handling that.

And don't forget slideshow images.

Personally, in my dream world, I would provide some button that switched-on details. So you browsed the website, then when you reached the point you are interested in buying, you click the button and now all the details are showing, throughout the site, no rollover or anything. I can do that from scratch, I'd have to check how to do it in Wordpress, and I've not seen anyone implement it that way.

7. Have a clear menu

Don't have more than 7 options in your menu.

Keep things really simple design-wise. Grey on white, with the current page just a little bolder or slightly more colour is good.

Don't expect people to know about your collections, just organise things for the person who is new to you.

Check it on mobile, if it doesn't change to a hamburger menu it could end up taking up the whole screen.

Don't

1. Don't make your website all about you

This may seem weird, since it's your website, but don't make it all about you.

Your website is all about your visitor and how you can take them from where they are to where they want to be.

If someone comes to your website because they are looking for a picture of a particular village square. Perhaps they met their wife at a dance there and it's their wedding anniversary coming up. This really isn't about you. It's about them and what they want and whether your picture will 'go' above the sideboard and arrive on time safely.

Don't put your 'about' page as the second option in your menu .. it's Home, ThingsTheVisitorCanDo1/2/3, About, Contact. Do you wander up to people at parties and say "Hi, I was born in Devon to a working class family and in 1985 I went to Goldsmith's College"? No, it's

too much too soon. The about page contains what we call hygiene factors, we check this page just before we buy, to satisfy ourselves we're not going to look stupid in the morning.

Oh, and mostly, your website should all be in the first person. I am writing to you. There's only me and you in this moment. I'm not writing to all my fans, either.

Exceptionally, if you are big enough to have a manager, it could be the manager writing it, in which case it would be third person throughout, and you contact me, the manager. Just be consistent.

2. Don't force people to know you before they know you

Don't categorise your work by things people don't know. And don't force people to choose before they have enough information.

For instance, you have a home page and you show some work and then if you start asking "do you want to see my commissions? My own work? Stuff that's for sale" it's all cognitive work. Since as a visitor I've no idea about any of it, I've got to hold all three in my head and click through them and understand how you see things. That's hard graft. Literally, it depletes blood sugar.

Same if you want people to choose between this collection and that collection, or this period versus that one, or this exhibition.

Instead, just let people relax and enjoy your work. If they see something they like, maybe have a "more like this" type link and that will naturally lead them to your portraits, or your blue period or whatever.

What next?

Check your email. This document is provided because you signed up to my mailing list and there are more emails coming. Engage with them. The more you interact, the more I can customise my help to suit your needs.

But basically, I can help you get all of these elements sorted, inexpensively.

Why? Remember what we're doing here. My job is to help you get to a safe and secure place (financially) where you can freely develop your creativity, achieve what you want, live the life you want and people pay you money to do that.

OK? Speak soon.