FIRST IMPRESSIONS + IMMEDIATE CALLS TO ACTION

YOUR WEBSITE'S HOMEPAGE IS GROUND ZERO FOR NEW STUDENTS

By David Gould
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Most marketing efforts by Proponent Group members are "outbound." You send an email blast, you do a radio interview, you post updates on social media or you rent booth space at a regional golf expo. Either way, the customer is "out there" and you're spending energy and money to connect with them.

As for "inbound" marketing…. well, that's basically your website—which people find through key-word searches or through exposure such as word-of-mouth. Inbound is obviously a nice thing, because the customer or prospect is doing the work, instead of you having to do it (or paying to have it done).

But more precisely, you've *already* done your marketing work in order to generate those inbound visits. You've created a classy, functional website that showcases your skills and persuades golfers to engage with you. Meanwhile the entire website from top to bottom doesn't have to be award-winning, experts will say, as long as your site's homepage is firing on all cylinders.

The homepage has to look appealing, make sense and be functional from the get-go. It has to provide the visitor a chance to "learn more" or even begin the purchase process right away. Like an old-fashioned newspaper article, your homepage should answer the who-what-when-where-why questions in peoples' minds. Of course, many a website visitor is a return visitor, so you need to present something that works for the new arrival and also sits well with the lesson-taker who has viewed the page dozens of times.

Viewing it from the customer's perspective, imagine them asking certain questions, for example:

- Can you (or your academy) make me a more skilled golfer?
- What evidence is there of student success, working with you?
- Are you equipped with the current technology?
- What is your instruction philosophy? How will you go about coaching me?
- Do I have a choice among instructors? What are the instructors like?
- Can I afford the rates being charged?
- Is the facility modern and enjoyable to visit? Will I be comfortable there?

Butch Harmon's homepage showcases Harmon as the star coach that he is while providing click-boxes up high that sell a service or deepen the engagement (through signup to receive his newsletter). Strong black/gold palette, plus Butch in a contrasting pink shirt.

• Is there an introductory program or programs? If so, what are these programs like?

Homepages for golf-instruction sites should be designed and worded to connect with mid-handicappers and high-handicappers. Not only are they the majority, they are more likely to shop for golf instruction online. The single-digit player who competes in club tournaments or takes a run at the city championship will most likely be asking around within his or her network long before visiting an Internet website in search of coaching.

The design of the page must include a call to action, or CTA—several if possible. The desktop version of your website may contain several CTA buttons, but there has to be one on the first screen consumers come to, whether it's via their phone, their tablet or a laptop. Don't be shy about filling your home page with multiple CTAs either to make sure nobody misses the "Book Now" opportunity or to vary the "calls" among secondary CTAs like "Free Trial," "Swing Assessment," "Schedule a Demo" or "Learn More."

Think of your secondary calls-to-action as chances for the customer to give "yes" answers to a series of a questions—each one leading closer to the final goal of scheduling and booking. Along the way the user is providing information, making decisions and becoming more engaged. They're moving "farther down the funnel" toward a purchase. "Subscribe to Our Newsletter" should be an immediate click option when the homepage opens.

For years there was a push to avoid making visitors scroll down through multiple screenfuls of content. With a homepage in particular, the priority was on keeping anything of importance "above the fold," i.e., visible in one screenful of a good-sized laptop. Failing this, there's a rule of thumb about accommodating "space-bar scrolling." In other words, because hitting the space bar scrolls down exactly one screenful, and people tend to know this, the design of web pages has to work so that the line at the bottom of a screen jumps up to become the top line of the next screen. Let your website company know you don't want space-bar scrolling fouled up by imprecise design.

Of course, so-called long-scrolling has made a roaring comeback, due to the prevalence of mobile devices as the hardware used to surf the web. So-called "momentum-scrolling" on touch-screens, where a flick of the finger sends the web page scrolling at high speed until eventually slowing down, contributed to the resurgence of the web page that goes on and on. "The smaller the screen, the longer the scroll," as one tech specialist phrased it.

The homepage of top teacher Stan Utley favors a clean look with minimal text, plus a four-panel rotation using different photos as backdrops to four purchase opportunities. The invitation to sign up for his newsletter is buried down several screenfuls, unfortunately.

Golf Channel Academy recently created a new website template for its coaches. A focus of the new websites is big, bold photography that renders nicely on mobile platforms—important, given that the majority of visitors to golf instructor websites are using mobile devices. Much of the photography shows the teachers engaged with students, in poses that let you see the teachers' faces. Additional photography shows clients having fun amid beautiful facilities. The goal is to depict an enjoyable, non-intimidating environment as soon as a visitor hits the homepage.

The "Splash" Page? It Was Never a Good Idea

Because the homepage of a website is a visitor's first impression, designers came up with the idea for "splash" pages—clean, colorful eye-candy panoramas with nothing else to look at except a logo and maybe a three-word celebratory phrase. Toward the bottom of the screen a user would spot a tiny "ENTER" button—by clicking on it they'd be taken to the normal and functional first page of the site. We don't see many golf academies or golf-instruction practices using this gimmick, and that's a good thing. According to the experts, splash pages hurt your SEO numbers significantly, and more importantly they cause users to turn away from your site, out of impatience and very likely because the "wow" factor just isn't wowing them. The one decent reason for a splash page is if your site translates into multiple languages and the user has to choose one—that's not a common issue for North American golf instructors. — *D.G.*

Two examples of well-conceived homepages from businesses outside golf are shown here. Top page uses a panoramic image of Boston, where the firm is based, and a large click-box titled "Search Our Properties," to suggest that its listings are in very desirable locations downtown. The other action being encouraged, "List Your Property," is also easily found in an orange box.

This homepage appeals to the visitor's emotions: "Work With a Company That Gets It" and "Trust us. We've been there too! We'll find jobs where you can thrive." That is a unique and compelling value proposition as soon as you land on the homepage. Calls to action are well-positioned, simply worded and nicely pop off the page in contrasting colors.
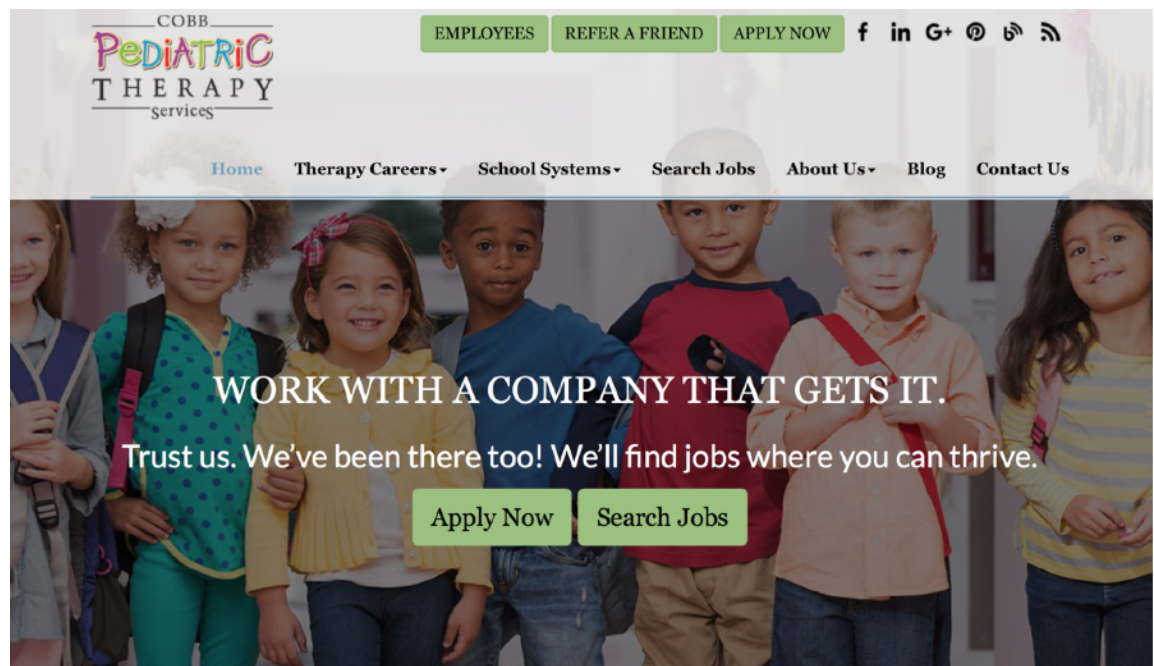
Summary: Keys to Smart Homepage Design

- Your website's homepage is the single most important element of your marketing effort.
- As soon as it hits the screen, your homepage should answer several vital questions and produce at least one call-to-action button.
- It's considered OK to have a homepage that scrolls down several screenfuls—on mobile devices people are fine with this. Just make sure that "above the fold" you are taking care of business.
- Every homepage establishes a tone and a feeling—yours should reflect your personality. **PG**