Built to Ring

SMOKE AND RECEIPTS, BOOK 1

Built to Ring

How We Design Websites That Make the Phone Ring, and Why Every Rule Is There

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Clickflame Press, Long Beach, California

Built to Ring. How We Design Websites That Make the Phone Ring, and Why Every Rule Is There.

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This book shares the methods of one agency. It is not legal advice. Rules on texting, calls, reviews and privacy differ by place and change over time.

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For every owner who answers the phone
on the first ring.

Contents

Why I Wrote This Book 9

PART ONE. THE WHY

1. A Website Has One Job 13

2. The First Phone Screen Decides the Call 18

PART TWO. THE LOOK

3. Light Pages, Real Color 25

4. Plain Type That Reads 30

5. Photos That Tell the Truth 34

6. Layout, Space and the Grid 38

7. Motion With a Job 42

PART THREE. THE MACHINE

8. Calls and Forms That Actually Work 47

9. Proof Without Smoke 52

12. Fast on a Cheap Phone 62

13. Every Site Its Own 66

PART FOUR. THE PROCESS

14. Decide Before You Build 70

15. Measure the Render 74

The Built to Ring Checklist 78

Where the Rules Come From 80

Anthony Limpert 81

BEFORE YOU START

Why I Wrote This Book

> Most small business websites are built to be looked at. Ours are built to make the phone ring. That one difference changes every choice on the page, from the font to the photo to the size of the button.

I started Clickflame in 2004 in Long Beach, California. Since then I have watched owners pay for websites that won awards and never brought in a single call. I have also watched plain sites, built by people who cared about the customer, keep a crew busy for years.

The gap between those two kinds of sites is not talent. It is not money either. It is a set of decisions. Some of them are about design. Most of them are about the person on the other side of the screen, standing in a driveway with a dead battery, a leaking roof or a locked car, holding a phone with one bar of signal and a thumb.

This book is every one of those decisions, written down. It is how we design websites at Clickflame and, more important, why. Every rule in here came out of a real build or a real break. When we got something wrong, it went into the rules. When a rule stopped helping, we cut it.

Who This Book Is For

Three kinds of people get the most out of it.

- Owners of local service businesses who want to know what a good site looks like before they pay someone to build one.

- Designers and small agencies who build sites for those owners and want a standard they can hold their work to.
- Anyone using AI tools to build websites, who keeps getting pages that look like every other page on the internet.

You do not need to write code to use this book. Where a rule needs code, the code is short and the reason comes first. If you hire out the work, hand your designer the checklist at the back and ask them to sign off on each line.

How the Book Is Built

There are four parts.

Part One is the why. It covers the one job a website has and the one screen that decides whether the job gets done.

Part Two is the look. Color, type, photos, layout and motion. These are the chapters most people think of as design.

Part Three is the machine. Calls, forms, proof, words, search, speed and the reason no two of our sites look alike. This is where most pretty websites quietly fail.

Part Four is the process. How we decide before we build, and how we test a site with checks that are allowed to say no.

Every chapter ends with a box called Do This Today. It is the shortest list of actions that will move your site forward. Some chapters also carry a box called The Receipt. That is a real thing that happened on one of our builds, told without names. I call them receipts because claims are cheap. Proof is what counts.

A Word on Rules

Rules in this book are written as rules, because a soft suggestion gets skipped the first time a deadline shows up. That does not mean they are carved in stone. Each one has a reason next to it. If your situation makes the reason go away, the rule can go too. If you cannot explain why you are breaking it, you are probably breaking it by accident.

Let us get the phone ringing.

Anthony Limpert
Long Beach, California

PART ONE

The Why

The one job a website has, and the one screen that decides it.

CHAPTER 1

A Website Has One Job

> A local service website has one job. It turns a stranger with a problem into a phone call, a text or a filled form. Everything else on the page either helps that happen or gets in the way.

That sounds obvious. It is not how most sites get built. Most sites get built like a brochure. The owner wants their history, their mission statement, a photo of the building, a slider with five slogans and a page called Our Philosophy. The designer wants a portfolio piece. Nobody in the room is thinking about the person who will actually use the thing.

Meet the Real Visitor

Picture who lands on a roofer's website. It is raining. There is a brown stain spreading across the bedroom ceiling. The visitor searched on a phone, tapped the first result that looked real and now has about five seconds to decide whether to call.

They are not reading your About page. They are not admiring your font pairing. They are asking three questions, fast.

1. Do these people fix my problem?
2. Are they real, and are they close?
3. How do I reach them right now?

If the screen answers all three before the thumb moves, you get the call. If it answers two, you might. If it answers one, they hit the back button and tap the next result. They will never tell you they were there.

THE RULE

Design for the visitor with the problem, on a phone, in a hurry. Not for the owner, not for the designer, not for an awards jury.

Brochure Sites Versus Phone Sites

The difference in plain terms looks like this.

A Brochure Site	A Phone Site
Opens with a slogan	Opens with the problem it fixes and where
Phone number in the footer	Phone number one tap away on every screen
Five slides that rotate	One strong picture that stays put
Stock photos of smiling models	Real photos of the real crew and real work
Contact form with ten fields	Short form that asks for a name, a phone and the need
Looks great on a big monitor	Looks great on a cheap phone in the sun
Done when it launches	Done when a test call and a test form both come through

Nothing on the right side is ugly. A phone site can be the best looking site in its market. The point is that every bit of polish is aimed at the call, not at itself.

Pretty Is Not the Goal, But It Matters

Some people read the last section and decide design does not matter. That is the opposite mistake, and it costs just as much.

People judge a business by its website the way they judge a truck by how clean it is. A site that looks cheap tells the visitor the work might be cheap. A site that looks broken on their phone tells them the business might not show up. Trust is formed in the first glance, before anyone reads a word.

So we do care how it looks. We care a lot. We care because looking good is how a stranger decides you are real. That is a job, and it serves the one job.

What the One Job Rules Out

Once you accept that a site has one job, a lot of common features become easy to cut.

- Sliders and carousels. Nobody waits for slide four. The message that matters most gets buried behind the one that loaded first.
- Loader screens. Every second of spinner is a second the visitor could have spent calling you, or calling someone else.
- Autoplay sound. It embarrasses people in waiting rooms. They leave.
- Pages nobody asked for. A page that exists only because the last site had one is a page you have to keep true forever.

- Pop ups in the first seconds. You are asking for a favor before you have answered their question.

What the one job rules in is just as clear. A headline that names the problem and the place. A phone button that is always in reach. Real proof. A short form. Speed.

> **THE RECEIPT**
>
> We ran a cold text drip once, to see if it would bring in work. We turned it off after 49 people replied STOP. A website that waits for people with a real need beats any message pushed at people who did not ask. That is why everything in this book is about being found and being trusted, not about chasing.

The Owner's Role

If you own the business, your job is not to pick colors. Your job is to supply the truth. Your real phone number. Your real service area. Real photos of real jobs. The real reviews customers left. Your license number if your trade has one. The prices you are willing to publish.

A designer can make all of that look great. A designer cannot make it up, and should never try. The best sites we build are the ones where the owner handed us a phone full of job photos and a straight list of what they do and do not do.

DO THIS TODAY

- [ ] Open your site on your own phone, outside, with your thumb only.
- [ ] Time how long it takes to find and tap the phone number. Over three seconds is too long.
- [ ] Write down the three questions your visitor asks. Check if the first screen answers them.
- [ ] List every page and feature on the site. Mark each one Helps The Call or Does Not. Plan to cut the second list.

CHAPTER 2

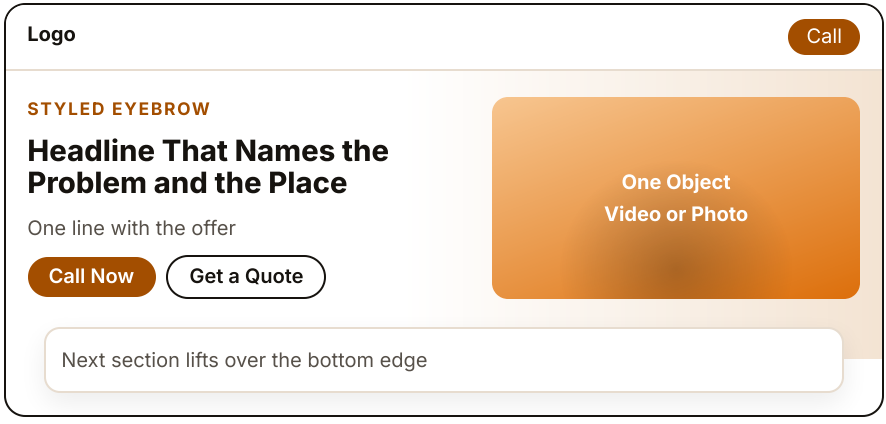
The First Phone Screen Decides the Call

> The part of the page you see before you scroll is called the first screen, or above the fold. On a phone it is about the size of a playing card. It decides more calls than every other part of the site put together.

We build the first screen before we build anything else. We do not start the second section until the first one holds up. That is not a style choice. It is where the visitor makes up their mind, so it is where the work goes first.

What Goes on the First Screen

Our standard first screen has the same short list of parts on every site. The way they look changes every time. The list does not.



The parts of a first screen. The look changes on every site. The parts stay.

1. A solid navigation bar with the logo and a way to call. It sits on a solid surface, never floating on top of a busy photo where nobody can read it.
2. One object to look at. A looping video of the real work, or one big, well lit photo. One thing, not five.
3. A short styled label above the headline, called an eyebrow. It sets the scene in two to five words.
4. A headline that names the problem and the place. Mobile Mechanic in Long Beach beats Excellence in Motion every time.
5. One line with the offer. What you get, how fast, or what it costs.
6. Two buttons. One loud, one quiet.
7. One small moving detail that shows the real product or service, like a card that cycles through the services or a live count of open slots.

The One Object

Ask someone to look at a great first screen for two seconds, then ask what they saw. They can name one thing. A truck. A roof. A hand on a lock. A plate of food. If they cannot name the one thing, the screen has too many things on it.

Pick the object before anything else, because it decides everything else. The colors of the page come from the object. The light comes from the object. The headline gets placed so it never crosses the object. On a wide screen we keep the subject in the right third and put a soft shade behind the text on the left so the words stay readable.

The object needs to sit on something. A shadow under it, a floor, a horizon. Objects that float in empty space look pasted in, and pasted in looks fake.

Why Video Usually Wins

Our first version of almost every site now opens with a short looping video taken from the client's own photos or footage. It is not there to entertain. A slow, steady loop of real work says this business is alive and busy in a way a still photo does not.

The rules for hero video are strict.

- It is muted, short and loops without a visible jump.
- It uses real footage first. Generated people standing in for a real crew are not allowed.
- There is a still image that shows first, so the screen is never blank while the video loads.
- The phone gets its own cut, framed for a tall screen, not a squeezed desktop video.
- Visitors who turn off motion in their phone settings see the still image only.

One Loud Button, One Quiet Button

Two buttons that look the same split the eye. The visitor stalls, even for half a second, deciding. So one button is loud. It is filled with the brand color and says the main action, usually Call Now. The other is quiet. It is an outline or a soft fill and says the other action, like Get a Quote or Text Us.

The labels are plain verbs. Call Now. Get a Quote. Book a Visit. Not Submit, not Learn More, not Discover Our Solutions. One label per action, used the same way on every page. A site that says Call Now on one page, Contact Us on another and Reach Out on a third is a site that makes people think, and thinking costs calls.

THE RULE

One thing to look at, one thing to read, one thing to tap. If you have to pick, cut.

The Phone Gets Its Own Layout

A desktop first screen squeezed onto a phone almost never works. The text wraps into a tower, the photo shrinks to a postage stamp and the buttons fall below the fold. We design the phone version on purpose, as its own layout.

On the phone the subject goes on top, then the headline, the offer and both buttons, all above the call bar at the bottom of the screen. If the Call button sits under the call bar, the visitor cannot tap it. That one mistake has shown up on more sites than we like to admit, which is why our checks now look for it on every build.

The Bleed Into the Next Section

A hard line where the hero ends and a gray box begins makes a page look like a stack of parts. We let the first screen bleed into the next one. The video fades into the page color, and the first card of the next section rises up and overlaps the bottom of the hero. On desktop that lift is around 58 pixels. On a phone it is around 30.

That small overlap does two jobs. It looks finished. It also shows the visitor there is more below, which gets them to scroll.

What Never Goes on the First Screen

- A row of statistics. Numbers with no context are noise, and the visitor came for a fix, not a report.

- A bullet list. It reads like a brochure.
- A slider or carousel.
- Text sitting on a busy photo with no shade behind it.
- A cookie banner covering half the screen when the site runs no ad tracking. If you do not need the banner, do not show it.
- Anything that slides sideways.

THE RECEIPT

We once shipped a run of first versions that opened with clean data and clear rules. They were correct and they were boring. The note that came back was blunt. Data and rules are not a first impression. Since then every first version opens with video or a big lit object, one headline, one offer, two buttons and a moving detail, before anyone has to ask.

The Two Second Check

Before any first screen is called done, we look at it live, in a real browser, at three widths. A phone at 375 pixels wide, a laptop at 1440 and an ultrawide monitor at 3440. Then we ask six questions.

1. Can someone name the one thing on the screen after two seconds?
2. Does the object sit on something?
3. Does the light on the button and the object seem to come from the same place?
4. Do the headline, the button and the frame line up on one edge?
5. Is there one loud button and one quiet one?
6. Take away the glow and the texture. Does the layout still hold? If it falls apart, the layout was the problem all along.

DO THIS TODAY

- [ ] Screenshot your first screen on a phone. Circle the one object. If you cannot pick one, that is your first fix.
- [ ] Rewrite your headline as the problem plus the place.
- [ ] Make one button loud and one quiet, with plain verb labels.
- [ ] Check the Call button is above the bottom call bar on a phone.

PART TWO

The Look

Color, type, photos, layout and motion, and the reason behind each choice.

CHAPTER 3

Light Pages, Real Color

> Our sites start on a light page. White or a warm paper tone for the background, near black for the words, and the brand color on the parts that matter. Dark sites are allowed when the brand calls for one. They are never the default.

Why Light Is the Default

Dark designs look dramatic in a portfolio. On a phone, outside, at noon, they are hard to read. They also tend to look alike. Black background, glowing accent, chrome type. Every design tool and every AI model reaches for that look when nobody stops it, so a dark site often reads as one more template.

Light pages read clean, open and trustworthy. They put the attention on the photos and the words. They print well, they hold up in bright sun and they make the brand color look stronger, because a color on white has room to breathe.

That does not mean every site is plain white. A light page can carry one bold band of brand color, a deep colored footer and photos full of life. What it avoids is a heavy dark theme over the whole site with no reason behind it.

Take the Color From the Logo

When a business already has a logo, the brand color comes from the logo artwork, not from whatever the old website used. Old stylesheets drift. Someone picks a close enough blue in 2015 and nobody checks again.

> **THE RECEIPT**
>
> On one rebuild the old site's code said the brand blue was #2563EB. The logo itself was #0050AA. The logo color was the real brand, and it was also much easier to read. White text on it scored 7.7 to 1 for contrast, against 5.1 to 1 for the color in the old code. The logo won on both counts.

To pull the color, shrink the logo down, ignore the grays, whites and blacks, and count which saturated color shows up most. That is the brand color. For a rebuild we keep enough of the old colors that the owner recognizes the site as theirs. A rebuild improves the brand. It never replaces it.

A Palette Has Four Parts

Every palette we build has the same four parts.

- The ground, which is the page background.
- The panel, which is the color of cards and boxes sitting on the ground.
- The ink, which is the color of the words.
- The accent pair, which is the brand color and one partner color.

Two accent colors at most. Three starts to look like a kids' menu.



Signal. Directories and data heavy pages



Steel. Fleet, RV and commercial



Bay Green. Auto repair and general service



Oxblood. Legal, bail and old solid trades



Sun Deck. Home services and landscaping



Clinic. Health, wellness and dental

Six of our light palette directions. Ground, panel, ink, then the accent pair. The client's logo color replaces the first accent.

We keep eight starting directions like the ones above, each tied to the kinds of trades it suits. A new brand with no logo starts from the direction that fits the trade. A brand with a logo starts from a direction and swaps in the logo color as the accent. We never use the same direction twice for two businesses in the same trade in the same city.

One combination is missing on purpose. Warm cream, clay orange and dark brown ink is what an unguided build reaches for, again and again. If a palette shows up without a decision behind it, it is probably that one.

The Accent Has Two Jobs

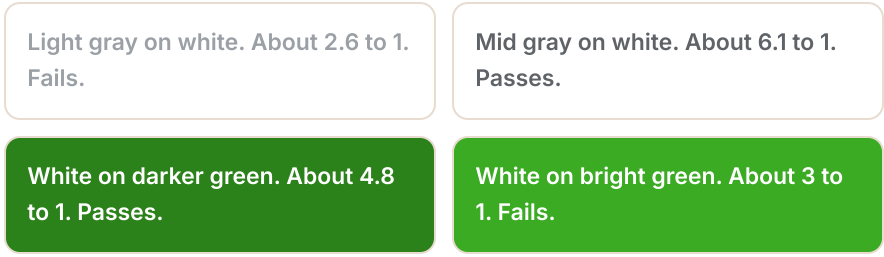
Brand colors are usually bright. Bright is great for thin lines, icons, small labels on dark bands and glows. Bright is often terrible for button fills and link text, because white text on a bright green or orange fails the contrast test.

So we split the accent in two. The bright logo color does the decoration. A darker version of the same color does the buttons and links, because it has to stay readable both as text on the light

page and with white text on top of it. One brand, two values, each doing the job it is good at. Forcing one color to do both jobs does both badly.

Contrast Is Not Optional

Every piece of text on our sites has to hit a contrast of at least 4.5 to 1 against what is behind it. That is the standard set by the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines for normal text. It applies to labels, small print, button text and text over photos, as well as paragraphs.



The bright brand green is fine for icons and lines. Buttons get the darker sibling.

Contrast matters for more than people with low vision. It matters for everyone holding a phone in the sun, everyone over forty and everyone with the screen dimmed to save battery. Faint gray text looks elegant in a design file and disappears in real life.

Do not trust a single score from an automated tool. We had a page score a perfect 100 on an accessibility audit while the main button in the navigation sat at 1.99 to 1. The tool checked the code. It did not check what the screen actually showed. We now check every visible line of text on the rendered page, in both light and dark mode.

Dark Mode Done Right

Some visitors set their phones to dark mode. A good site can follow along. The trick is to define every color once, as a named token, and then swap the token values for dark mode. A color that only exists inside the dark mode rules, or a see through color typed as a fixed value, will not flip and will break.

DO THIS TODAY

- [ ] Pull your brand color from your logo file, not your old website.
- [ ] Write down your ground, panel, ink and two accents. If you have more than two accents, cut.
- [ ] Make a darker version of your brand color for buttons and links.
- [ ] Run a contrast check on your smallest, lightest text. Anything under 4.5 to 1 gets darker.

CHAPTER 4

Plain Type That Reads

> The font on a local service site has one job. It gets read. It does not have a personality, it does not set a mood and it does not make a statement. The logo carries the personality. The type stays clean.

Plain Fonts Only

We use plain, readable sans serif families. Inter is our default. Others we are happy with include Source Sans 3, IBM Plex Sans, DM Sans, Manrope, Figtree, Public Sans, Archivo and Montserrat. They have one thing in common. Nobody notices them. People just read the words.

The fonts we refuse to use fall into a few groups.

- Costume fonts. Western saloon type, comic lettering, handwriting, marker, stencil, grunge, horror, blackletter and anything with a built in outline or shadow.
- Condensed capitals. Tall, narrow, all caps faces that look great on a gym poster and shout on a website.
- Fashion serifs. High contrast display serifs, especially in italic. They look like a perfume ad, not a plumber.
- Heavy type squeezed tight. A very bold weight with the letters pulled closer than normal reads as cramped.

THE RECEIPT

A lawn care business had a logo with a western feel. An automated step matched the logo lettering to the nearest free font and picked a saloon style face for every heading on the site. The result looked like a theme park. It was rebuilt the same day with a plain sans, and the logo kept its western feel all on its own. The lesson stuck. When a logo has character, let the logo be the only place it lives.

Sizes That Survive a Phone

Small text is the most common legibility failure we see. Designers set labels, captions and fine print at 11 or 12 pixels because it looks tidy on a big monitor. On a phone it is unreadable.

Our floor is 14.5 pixels for anything a visitor needs to read, including labels, tags, chips and fine print. Body text sits around 17 to 18 pixels on a phone. Headings go from about 28 pixels on a phone up to around 56 on a wide desktop, scaling smoothly with the screen width rather than jumping at break points.

Headline 700

Section Heading 600

Body text sits at a size you can read at arm's length.

Small print still clears the floor and the contrast test.

One family, a few weights, clear steps between sizes.

Weights and Spacing

Headings sit at a weight of 600 or 700. Heavier than that starts to look like shouting. Body text sits at 400. Use one family for everything. Two families is fine if you have a real reason. Three is a

ransom note.

Letter spacing on large headings can tighten a little, to about minus 0.02 of the font size, because big type looks loose at default spacing. Do not go tighter than that on bold type. Line height for body text sits around 1.55 to 1.65 so lines do not run together. Keep paragraphs to around 60 to 75 characters per line on desktop so the eye can find the start of the next line.

Title Case Headings

Headings, card titles, button labels and menu items are written in Title Case. That means the main words start with a capital letter and the small words like a, an, the, and, or, of, in, on, to, for, at and by stay lowercase, unless they start the heading.

We write Title Case into the actual words, not with a style rule that changes how lowercase text displays. Search engines, screen readers and AI tools read the real words, and the real words should already be right.

Watch out for business names. A tool that converts headings to Title Case will happily turn a brand that spells itself oddly into something the owner never wrote. Names are protected and left exactly as the business writes them.

Punctuation That Reads Like a Person

Our copy avoids long dashes, semicolons and colons in sentences. Short sentences with periods and commas read faster on a phone and sound like a person talking. Long dashes in particular have become a tell for text written by a machine with no editor. Phone numbers, license codes, model names and web addresses keep their punctuation, because those are facts, not prose.

Write at an eighth or ninth grade reading level. That is not talking down to anyone. It is how busy adults prefer to read, including the ones with advanced degrees.

Loading Fonts Without Slowing the Page

A custom font is a file the phone has to download. Done badly, it hides the text until the file arrives, or it makes the page jump when the font swaps in. Three habits fix most of it.

- Host the font file yourself and load only the weights you use.
- Show a matched system font right away and swap when the real one arrives.
- Tune the fallback font size so the swap does not shift the layout.

DO THIS TODAY

- [ ] List every font on your site. If any of them have a costume, replace them with one plain family.
- [ ] Find your smallest text. Bring it up to at least 14.5 pixels.
- [ ] Fix every heading and button to Title Case in the words themselves.
- [ ] Read your home page out loud. Any sentence you run out of breath on gets split.

CHAPTER 5

Photos That Tell the Truth

> The fastest way to make a local business look fake is a stock photo of a smiling model in a clean uniform holding a wrench they have never used. The fastest way to make it look real is a slightly messy photo of the actual owner, in the actual truck, doing the actual job.

Real Photos First

We use photos in this order of preference.

1. The client's own photos of their crew, their trucks and their finished work.
2. Photos we take of the real business.
3. Licensed photos of the trade that show work, tools or places, never people posing as staff.
4. Generated images, only for objects, scenes and textures, never people standing in for a real crew.

A stock photo can show a roof. It cannot show your roofer. The moment a visitor recognizes the same smiling model from three other websites, every claim on the page loses weight. Passing off stock or generated people as your team is also deceptive, and it is the kind of thing that turns a happy customer into an angry review when they meet the real crew.

Read the Photos for Facts

When we rebuild a site, we pull every image off the old one and lay them out on one sheet so we can see them all at once. Not to reuse them blindly. To read them.

Owners hide facts in their images all the time. A flyer with a partnership nobody mentioned in the text. A banner with a yearly service plan. A truck wrap with a license number. A certificate on the shop wall. Those facts belong in the words of the site too, where search engines and visitors can find them.

Protect the People in the Photos

Job photos often carry more than the job. Before any photo goes live we check three things.

- License plates. Blur or crop them.
- Faces of customers or bystanders who did not agree to be on a website. Crop or skip.
- Location data. Phones store GPS coordinates inside photos. A photo taken in a customer's driveway can point to that customer's home.

Our rule on location data has a nuance. Photos of the business itself, its shop or its own public location keep their original GPS data, because it ties the photo to a real place. Photos taken at a customer's home get that data stripped. When in doubt, strip it.

Credit the Photographer

When a photo was taken by a named photographer, they get credit. A visible line near the photo, and the same name in the file's own data. It is the right thing to do, it is often required by the license and it tells search engines who made the image.

Make Photos Light

A photo straight off a phone can be four or five megabytes. On a page that is the difference between loading in one second and loading in eight. Every photo gets resized to the largest size it will ever be shown at and saved in a modern format like WebP. A 900 pixel wide photo should usually land between about 12 and 60 kilobytes.

Host your own photos. Do not lean on another site to serve them. When the other site changes, your photos break, and a listing with no photo looks abandoned.

Always set the width and height of every image in the code. That lets the browser hold the space before the photo arrives, so the page does not jump while the visitor is reading. Page jumping is one of the measures Google uses to judge page experience, and it is one of the most annoying things a site can do to someone trying to tap a button.

Photos on Every Page

Inner pages need photos too. A service page that is all text reads like a terms of service document. Every page head and most cards carry a real photo. The service page for brake repair shows brakes. The city page shows that city. The about page shows the owner.

Our author and owner photos follow the same rule. The photo that goes on a profile is a real working photo, not a stiff headshot in a suit, unless the person truly works in a suit.

THE RULE

If a visitor met your crew tomorrow, would they recognize them from your website? If not, change the photos.

DO THIS TODAY

- [ ] Count the stock photos of people on your site. Replace every one with a real photo, even a phone photo.
- [ ] Take ten photos of real work this week. Before, during and after.
- [ ] Check your job photos for plates, faces and home locations.
- [ ] Run your biggest photos through a free image compressor and save them as WebP.

CHAPTER 6

Layout, Space and the Grid

> Layout is where a site starts to feel calm or crowded. Calm sells. A crowded page makes the visitor work, and people with a leaking pipe do not want to work.

Start With a Grid

We lay pages out on a 12 column grid. Twelve divides cleanly into halves, thirds, quarters and sixths, so almost any layout fits without odd leftovers. The outer margin scales with the screen, from 16 pixels on a small phone up to about 60 pixels on a desktop.

Spacing follows a rhythm. Pick a base unit, like 8 pixels, and make every gap a multiple of it. Small gaps inside a card, medium gaps between cards, large gaps between sections. When every gap comes from the same short list, the page looks planned even if nobody can say why.

Line things up. The left edge of the headline, the left edge of the button and the left edge of the frame should sit on one line. When edges almost line up but miss by a few pixels, the page looks careless without the visitor knowing what is wrong.

Less on the Page

A few limits keep pages from getting busy.

- Two eyebrow labels per page, not eight. When every section has a little label on top, none of them stand out.
- One button label per action. Call Now means call, everywhere.

- Two accent colors at most.
- One loud button per screen.
- Card grids open with around 12 cards and fold the rest behind a Show More button. Nobody scrolls through 80 cards.

Nothing Slides Sideways

No section on our sites scrolls or swipes left to right, at any width. That means no carousels, no swipe strips, no rows that snap from card to card and no scrolling text tickers.

The reasons stack up. Most people never swipe a sideways row, so anything past the first card might as well not exist. Sideways rows fight with the phone's own back gesture. They are hard to use with a keyboard or a screen reader. And a row that is wider than the screen often drags the whole page sideways with it, which makes the site feel broken.

Instead, cards wrap into a grid. Three across on a desktop, two on a tablet, one on a phone. Everything is visible by scrolling down, the way people already move through a page.

THE RULE

The page moves in one direction. Down.

Navigation That Stays Out of the Way

The top bar holds the logo, a short menu and a way to call. Short is the key word. On a phone the menu folds behind a Menu button in the header. Services and service areas can open into lists of every page, so visitors and search engines can reach them in one tap.

Menu items should never squeeze or overlap. When a new link gets added a year from now and it does not fit, it should spill out in plain sight where someone will notice, not quietly overlap the phone number.

The Bottom Call Bar

On phones and small tablets we add a fixed bar at the bottom of the screen. It holds two buttons. Call Us, and one other that fits the audience, like Translate for a bilingual market or Text Us.

Two buttons, not four. A bar with Call, Text, Directions and Menu crowds the bottom of a small screen and splits the thumb. The menu lives in the header, never in the bottom bar.

The bar hides while the main call buttons in the header are already on screen, so the visitor never sees two of the same thing stacked up.

Built for Every Screen Size

Every layout has to work at every width with no gaps between the break points. That sounds obvious until you see a menu that only fits between 1024 and 1280 pixels wide and breaks on every monitor above it.

We check every site at three sizes. A phone at 375 pixels wide, a laptop at 1440 and an ultrawide at 3440. That last one surprises people. Wide monitors are common in offices, and on them most sites shrink into a small island in the middle of a sea of blank space. We add a final step to every build that lets the page grow on very wide screens, so the site fills the screen the way it was designed to.

THE RECEIPT

A prospect told us one of our sites looked tiny on their monitor. They were right. On a 3440 pixel screen most of our sites at the time were a narrow column floating in empty space. We wrote a fix that scales the layout on wide screens without touching anything under 2200 pixels and now run it as the last step of every build.

A Short CSS Reset Saves Hours

Browsers add their own default styles, and a few of them cause layout bugs that show up on phones and nowhere else. These lines go into every site on day one.

```
figure, blockquote, dl, dd { margin: 0 }
[hidden] { display: none !important }
img { max-width: 100%; height: auto; display: block }
```

The first line stops browsers from adding 40 pixels of side margin to quotes and figures, which shrinks cards on a phone. The second makes sure hidden things really stay hidden. The third keeps images inside their boxes and stops them from stretching out of shape.

DO THIS TODAY

- [ ] Search your site for any sideways scrolling row and turn it into a grid.
- [ ] Count the little labels above your section headings. Keep two.
- [ ] Open your site on the widest screen you can find and on your phone. Write down what breaks.
- [ ] Check that the bottom call bar has two buttons, not four.

CHAPTER 7

Motion With a Job

> Motion on a website is like salt. A little makes everything better. Too much ruins the meal. Every moving thing on our sites has a job, and if it cannot name its job, it does not move.

Good Jobs for Motion

- Showing the work is alive. A slow loop of real footage in the first screen.
- Showing the product. A small card that cycles through services, or a booking widget that shows open times.
- Showing that something happened. A button that changes when tapped, a form that confirms it was sent.
- Guiding the eye. A gentle fade as a section comes into view.
- Keeping place. A smooth change between pages so the menu does not flash.

Bad Jobs for Motion

- Filling time while the site loads. Loader screens are banned.
- Showing off. Particle storms, spinning logos and text that flies in letter by letter.
- Moving sideways. Carousels, sliders and tickers, for the reasons in the last chapter.
- Smooth scroll scripts that take over the scroll wheel. They make the page feel like it is stuck in syrup and fight with how the

visitor's own device scrolls.

The Base State Is Always Visible

This is the motion rule that catches the most real bugs. Whatever moves must look complete before it moves.

A common way to build a fade in effect is to start every section invisible and then reveal it when a script sees it on screen. If the script is slow, blocked or never runs, the section stays invisible forever. Search engines see a blank page. Screenshots come out empty. A visitor on a slow connection sees white space where your services should be.

So we flip it. Everything starts visible. Motion is added on top only once the script is running. If anything fails, the visitor still gets a complete page that simply does not animate.

> **THE RECEIPT**
>
> We once shipped scroll effects that started at zero opacity. In a normal browser the pages looked great. To crawlers and screenshot tools they were blank below the first screen. Nothing told us. We found it by looking at a screenshot that should have had content in it. The rule since then is simple. No effect ever starts from invisible without a fallback that shows the content.

Respect the Off Switch

Phones and computers have a setting that asks apps to cut down on motion. Some people turn it on because motion makes them dizzy or sick. Every one of our sites listens to that setting. When it is on, the video hero shows its still image, fades become instant and nothing slides or floats.

```
@media (prefers-reduced-motion: reduce) {
  *, *::before, *::after {
    animation-duration: .01ms !important;
    transition-duration: .01ms !important;
    scroll-behavior: auto !important;
  }
}
```

Keep It Light

Motion costs speed. A big animation library can weigh more than the rest of the page. We use the browser's own built in features first, plain style rules and small scripts, and reach for a heavy library only when an effect truly needs it.

Modern browsers can now do a lot on their own. Page to page transitions that keep the header in place. Progress bars tied to how far the visitor has scrolled. Sections that fade as they enter the screen. None of these need a large script anymore.

Test Motion in a Real Browser

Screenshots cannot show motion, and some preview tools freeze animations. Every moving part gets checked by a person, in a real browser, on a real phone if possible. Watch it twice. Then turn on the reduce motion setting and watch it again.

DO THIS TODAY

- [ ] List every moving thing on your site and write its job next to it. Cut the ones with no job.
- [ ] Turn on reduce motion on your phone and load your site. Fix anything that still moves.
- [ ] Load your site with scripts turned off. If sections vanish, fix the base state.
- [ ] Remove any loader screen.

PART THREE

The Machine

Calls, forms, proof, words, search, speed and a site that looks like nobody else's. Where most pretty websites quietly fail.

CHAPTER 8

Calls and Forms That Actually Work

> A site can look perfect and still lose every lead it gets. The phone link dials the wrong number. The form sends into nothing. The thank you page shows up whether or not the message went through. These are not design problems in the usual sense. They are the most important design problems there are.

The Phone Is the Product

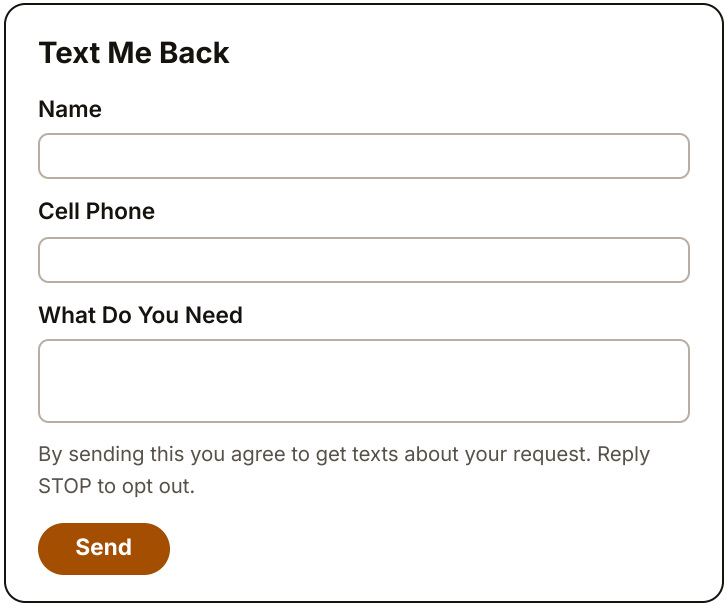
For most local service businesses the call is the sale. So the phone number is treated like the most important element on the page, because it is.

- Every phone number on the site is a tap to call link, never plain text.
- The number appears in the header, in the first screen, in the bottom call bar on phones and in the footer.
- Service pages put the number in the page description that shows up in search results, so a searcher can call without even opening the site.
- The number on the site matches the number on the business's Google profile, or a tracked number that forwards to it. When two places disagree, we stop and ask which number is right.

Short Forms Win

Every field on a form is a reason to quit. Our lead forms ask for three things first. A name, a phone number and what they need. Email is optional or comes later. Everything else can wait for the call.

The phone number is required on every lead form. An email only lead cannot be texted back, and a fast text back is often what wins the job. By lead form we mean anything that produces a person to contact. Quote forms, contact forms, booking forms, claims, waitlists, notify me buttons and case study submissions all count. Search boxes, filters and logins do not.



Three fields, a plain consent line and one button. That is the whole form.

Get Consent the Right Way

If you plan to text people back, say so right under the phone field, in plain words. Under federal rules, many kinds of marketing texts and calls need prior express written consent, and many states add their own rules on top. A clear line under the field plus a record of when they agreed protects both you and the customer. If your business sends marketing texts, talk to someone who knows the rules in your state.

Errors People Can See

When a visitor makes a mistake on a form, show every problem at once, next to the field it belongs to, in words a person would use. A form that only flags the first empty field makes the visitor submit, fix, submit, fix, submit. Most of them give up on the second round.

Never clear the form when there is an error. Never say Invalid Input. Say Please add a phone number so we can text you back.

The Money Path Must Be Tested for Real

This is the most important habit in this chapter. Before a site launches and after every change to a form, we send a real submission through it and confirm it arrived where it was supposed to go. Then we delete the test.

THE RECEIPT

A form on our own course site sent every case study submission into an error after we moved hosts. The new host did not handle the form the way the old one had. Nothing was captured. The visitor saw no error. From the outside the form looked perfect. That is why we now test by sending a real submission, every time, and why a form with no working handler must say so and give another way to reach us instead of pretending.

The same goes for calls. Tap the number on a real phone. Make sure it rings the right line. If calls forward through a tracking number, check that the forward works after hours too.

A Map Where It Helps

A small map card helps a local visitor see you are close. We use the free embedded Google map, loaded only when the visitor scrolls near it so it does not slow the first screen. A business with a public storefront gets a pin on its address. A business run from a home gets a map of its city, never a pin on the house.

Measure the Calls

Set up analytics to count the things that matter. Taps on the phone number, taps on the quote button and completed forms. Mark those as key events so they show up in reports as wins, apart from plain clicks. A site that cannot tell you how many calls it produced cannot tell you if a redesign helped.

DO THIS TODAY

- [ ] Tap every phone number on your site from a phone. Confirm each one rings the right line.
- [ ] Send a real test through every form. Confirm it arrived. Delete it.
- [ ] Cut your main form down to name, phone and need.
- [ ] Add a plain consent line under the phone field if you text people back.

CHAPTER 9

Proof Without Smoke

> Smoke is every claim a business makes about itself. Best in town. Trusted by thousands. Award winning. Receipts are the proof. Real reviews, real photos, a real license number, a real price. Visitors have learned to ignore smoke. They still trust receipts.

Never Invent Proof

This is the hardest rule in the book for some owners, and it does not bend.

- Never write a review. Never edit one to sound better. Quote it word for word or do not quote it.
- Never cut a review off in the middle to hide the part you did not like.
- Never invent a count. If you do not know how many jobs you have done, do not print a number.
- Never show a badge, award, rating or certification you did not earn.
- Never claim more years in business, more trucks or more staff than you have.

Beyond being wrong, fake reviews are illegal. The Federal Trade Commission has a rule against fake and misleading reviews and testimonials, including reviews written by people who never used the business and reviews bought or made up by the business. It carries real penalties.

Fake proof also fails in practice. Customers notice. Competitors notice. Search engines notice. And when the one customer who was fooled meets the real business, the review they leave will be real.

What Counts as Real Proof

- Reviews from real customers, quoted exactly, with a first name and the date or the place they were left.
- Photos of real jobs. Before and after works especially well.
- License numbers that a visitor can look up on the state's own site.
- Insurance and bonding, stated plainly.
- Published prices, or real price ranges.
- A real owner with a real name and a real face.
- Years in business that match public records.
- Memberships and awards, linked to the organization that gave them.

Link Proof to Its Source

When a site claims a license, a credential, an award or a ranking, the claim links to the place that issued it. The state license lookup, the association's member page, the award's own announcement. Never to a page on your own site that just repeats the claim. If there is no source to link to, there is usually no claim to make.

This one habit does more for trust than any design trick. A visitor who taps a license number and lands on the state's own page showing an active license has stopped wondering if you are real.

Proof When You Are New

A business that just opened has no reviews and no awards. It still has receipts.

- The owner's own story and real experience, in their own words.
- Photos of real work, even if it was done for family or at a past job, labeled truthfully.
- A license and insurance.
- A clear price or a clear promise, like a written estimate before any work starts.
- A real phone number answered by a real person.

A new business that tells the truth beats an old business that hides behind smoke.

Promise Lines

The short line under a button is one of the highest value spots on the page. It answers the worry that stops the tap. Free estimate. No contract. We text back within ten minutes. Only write a promise the business actually keeps every time. A broken promise in the most visible spot on the page does more harm than no promise at all.

THE RULE

If you cannot point to the receipt, do not make the claim.

Own Mistakes in Public

Something will go wrong eventually. A wrong price on a page. A bad review that is fair. A promise missed. The answer is the same each time. Own it, fix it and say what changed. A business that answers a bad review with a calm fix often wins more trust than it lost.

DO THIS TODAY

- [ ] Read every review on your site. Check each one against the original, word for word.
- [ ] Remove any badge, award or number you cannot link to a source.
- [ ] Link your license number to the state's own lookup page.
- [ ] Write one promise line under your main button that you keep every time.

CHAPTER 10

Words That Get the Call

> Design gets the visitor to read. Words get them to call. On a local service site the words are short, plain and full of facts, and they are laid out so a visitor can stop reading at any point and still have what they need.

Bite, Snack, Meal

Every service page, city page and article on our sites is built in three layers.

- The bite. One sentence at the top that answers the question the visitor came with. The key phrase in it is bold.
- The snack. A short box with four points. Price range, how fast, where and one thing that sets this business apart.
- The meal. The full page, with real prices, real photos and answers to the questions people actually ask.

A visitor in a hurry reads the bite and calls. A careful visitor reads the snack and calls. A researcher reads the whole meal and calls. Nobody has to dig.

The bite and the snack are written from that page's own facts, never from a fill in the blank template. When a thousand pages on a site open with the same sentence and only the town name changes, readers notice and search engines notice. Each page earns its own opening.

Lead With the Answer

Most pages are written backward. They open with a story about the company and save the answer for the bottom. Flip it. Answer first, then explain. If someone searched how much does a brake job cost, the first line should give the range.

Answer first pages also do better with AI search features, which pull short, clear answers from the top of a page. Google says no special tricks are needed for its AI features. Clear, useful pages that answer the question are what they reward.

Write Like a Person Talks

- Short sentences. One idea each.
- Second person. You and your, not customers and their.
- Numbers instead of adjectives. Same day in most of Long Beach beats fast and reliable.
- American spelling and everyday words.
- No hedges about your own setup. If calls forward to a partner, say who answers, plainly, or say nothing. Do not apologize in the copy.
- No disclaimer labels on your own photos and examples.

Prices on the Page

Publishing prices scares owners. It also wins calls. A visitor who sees a real range knows you are not going to surprise them, and they call ready to book instead of ready to haggle.

When a price changes, it changes everywhere at once. The body copy, the question and answer section, the pricing tiles, the page description in search results and the structured data behind the

page. Miss one and a search engine will keep showing the old number for weeks.

Prices also have dependents. If your call out fee is also the low end of your diagnostic range, both move together. Changing one number blindly across a site can turn a sentence into nonsense.

Questions People Actually Ask

Every service page ends with real questions and real answers. Pull them from the calls you get, the texts you answer and the questions customers ask on the job. Not from a list of questions you wish people asked.

Keep each answer short and complete on its own. A visitor might land on one answer from a search result and never see the rest of the page.

THE RULE

Answer first, in plain words, with real numbers. Then stop talking and show the phone number.

DO THIS TODAY

- [ ] Rewrite the first sentence of your top service page so it answers the question in one line.
- [ ] Add a four point box under it with price, speed, area and one difference.
- [ ] Write down the five questions you hear most on calls. Answer them on the page.
- [ ] Replace every adjective on your home page that could be a number.

CHAPTER 11

Pages Search Engines Understand

> A website nobody finds cannot ring anything. Search is not a separate project you bolt on after the design. Titles, headings, page structure and the facts hidden in the code are all design decisions, and they decide whether the page shows up at all.

The Title Formula

The page title is the blue link in search results. It is the first piece of your design most visitors ever see. Our default shape is the place, the service and the phone number.

Mobile Mechanic in Long Beach CA. Call (562) 555 0100

That shape answers all three questions from Chapter 1 before the visitor even reaches the site. What you fix, where, and how to reach you. We vary it across a set of pages so they do not all read the same, but that is the shape we vary around. Keep titles short enough that the phone number does not get cut off on a phone screen.

The Page Description

The short paragraph under the title in search results is the page description. Ours run about 120 to 155 characters. They lead with what and where, include one fact a reader could check, carry the

phone number on every service page and end with a reason to tap. A visitor can call straight from the search result without opening the site, and that is a win.

Headings Are an Outline

Each page has one main heading that says what the page is about. The section headings below it read like an outline. If you read only the headings, you should understand the page. Do not use a heading tag just to make text big. If you want big text that is not a heading, make it big with styling.

Structured Data That Only Says What Is True

Structured data is a block of facts in the page code that tells search engines exactly what the page describes. The business name, address, phone, hours, service area, prices and questions and answers. Every one of our sites carries it.

- It describes only what is visible on the page and true in the world.
- Questions and answers in the data match the questions and answers on the page, word for word.
- Star ratings are never added to the data unless the rules allow it and the reviews are real and on the page.
- Every block is tested so it reads correctly. A single broken bracket can make search engines ignore all of it.

Sitemaps and Fresh Dates

A sitemap is a list of every page you want found. Split big ones into smaller lists by section. A small sitemap gets read often. A giant one gets read rarely.

Each page in the sitemap can say when it last changed. Only change that date when the page really changed. Stamping today's date on every page every time you rebuild teaches search engines to ignore your dates entirely.

Launch Small, Grow on Purpose

When a site has many pages, especially a directory or a site with many city pages, we let search engines see the best few hundred first. The rest stay hidden from search until they are filled with real, useful facts. Then they join in batches. A site that launches with thousands of thin pages tells search engines it is a thin site.

Tell Search Engines You Exist

Every new site gets added to Google Search Console and Bing Webmaster Tools with its sitemap submitted. Bing's tools also feed several AI search products, so they matter more than people think. After launch, check which pages got found and which did not, and fix the reason rather than asking again and again.

DO THIS TODAY

- [ ] Rewrite your home page title as place, service and phone.
- [ ] Read only the headings of your top page. If they do not tell the story, rewrite them.
- [ ] Test your structured data in a free rich results tester.
- [ ] Check that your site is in both Google Search Console and Bing Webmaster Tools.

CHAPTER 12

Fast on a Cheap Phone

> Your visitor is not on your office internet with your new laptop. They are on a three year old phone with a cracked screen and one bar of signal in a parking lot. Build for that phone and every other device gets a fast site for free.

Why Speed Is Design

A slow site is a design decision, even when nobody made it on purpose. Every big photo, every font weight, every script and every widget was chosen by someone. Each one adds wait time. And every extra second on a phone loses people who were ready to call.

Google measures page experience with a set of numbers called Core Web Vitals. The three that matter most are how fast the biggest thing on the first screen shows up, how fast the page reacts when someone taps, and how much the layout jumps around while it loads. Each one is something a visitor can feel.

Start Plain

Most of our sites are plain HTML files with a small style sheet and a little script. No heavy page builder, no database, no plugin stack. Plain files load fast, cost little to host, cannot be hacked through a plugin and keep working for years without updates.

That is not the only way to build a fast site. It is the way with the fewest chances to go slow.

Load the Heavy Stuff Later

The first screen loads first and loads fast. Everything heavy that sits further down the page, like maps, video players, review widgets and big galleries, waits until the visitor scrolls near it.

> **THE RECEIPT**
>
> Our own home page went from a mobile speed score of 80 to 97 by loading heavy sections only when the visitor scrolled to them. Same design, same content. The page just stopped asking the phone to do everything at once.

The Short List That Fixes Most Sites

- Resize and compress every image, and save it as WebP.
- Set the width and height on every image so the page does not jump.
- Give the main first screen image high loading priority and load it right away.
- Host your own fonts and load only the weights you use.
- Delay chat widgets, tracking tags and other outside scripts until the visitor interacts or a few seconds pass. Set them up so they still count the visit.
- Load maps only when the visitor scrolls near them.
- Give every file name a version stamp so returning visitors never run old code against new pages.

Write Code Old Phones Can Run

Newer code features are tempting. But if one line of your script uses something an older phone does not understand, the whole script can fail on that phone, and the visitor sees a broken page with no warning.

> **THE RECEIPT**
>
> Two lines of newer code turned a shop's tablet into a blank white screen. The tablet's browser did not understand them, so the whole script failed to load. Everything worked on newer devices. The fix was to tell our build tool which browsers we support, by name and version, so it writes code those browsers can run.

Measure More Than Once

Speed tests have moods. The first test after a fresh update often reads about ten points low, because the server's cache is cold. Run it again before you panic. And test the real live site, not a copy on your own computer, because your computer is not where your visitors are.

Better still, look at field data. Google's own reports show how fast your site loads for real visitors over the past month. That number beats any single lab test.

DO THIS TODAY

- [ ] Run your home page through a free page speed test on mobile. Write down the score. Run it again.
- [ ] Find the three biggest files on the page. Shrink or delay them.
- [ ] Delay your chat widget until the visitor interacts.
- [ ] Load your site on the oldest phone you can borrow.

CHAPTER 13

Every Site Its Own

> Most agencies sell one template with a new logo on it. We build every site to look like the business it belongs to and nobody else. That is better for the owner, better for the visitor and better with search engines.

Why Templates Hurt

When fifty sites share the same layout, the same section order, the same button styles and the same hidden comments in the code, they read as one network. Visitors who have seen the template before stop trusting it. Search engines that see the same skeleton across many sites start to treat them as one source, and they can treat thin, copied pages as spam.

Google's spam policies call out scaled content abuse, which is making many pages mostly to rank rather than to help people, no matter how they were made. Copy and paste city pages, mass generated pages and pages that only swap the town name are exactly that. A unique site built around real facts is the opposite.

Keep Their Brand, Improve the Execution

When we rebuild a site, we keep the business's brand. Their logo, their colors, their photos, their real facts and their voice. We make all of it better. Sharper photos, clearer words, a cleaner layout. The owner should look at the new site and say that is us, only better. They should never look at it and say who is that.

Different Where It Counts

Every new site gets its own set of choices.

- Its own palette direction, never repeated for two businesses in the same trade and city.
- Its own first screen layout, chosen from several that fit what the business actually has.
- Three to five signature features, picked from a list of modern browser features. Things like page to page transitions, a native pop up dialog, a reading progress bar, a form field that grows as you type or questions that open one at a time.
- Its own page structure, chosen from the pages that actually get visits rather than copied from the last site.
- Its own words. The short answer at the top of each page is built from that page's own facts, never from a fill in the blank template.

No Builder Signature

Our client sites carry one visible credit in the footer that says Site by Clickflame, with a plain link that passes no ranking credit. That is it. No hidden comment blocks, no shared text files that say the same thing on every site, no stamp in the code that ties every site to the same author. Those hidden stamps are exactly the kind of thing that makes a set of sites look like one template.

THE RULE

If someone put your site next to the last three you built, they should not be able to tell they came from the same shop.

Start From the Pages That Get Visits

Most design effort goes into the home page. Most search visits land somewhere else. A service page, a city page, a single listing. We look at which kinds of pages actually earn clicks, then design those first, so the pages that meet the most visitors get the most care.

Each Page Has Its Own Reason to Exist

A page earns its place by helping someone. A city page earns it with real facts about serving that city. Real jobs done there, real drive times, real local details. A service page earns it with real prices, real photos of that service and real answers to the questions people ask about it. A page that could swap its city name with any other city and still read the same has no reason to exist.

DO THIS TODAY

- [ ] Put your site side by side with two competitors. List what is the same. Change one of those things.
- [ ] Pick three signature features your site does not use yet.
- [ ] Read your city pages. If two of them only differ in the town name, rewrite one with real local facts or remove it.
- [ ] View the source of your site and remove any comment that does not need to be there.

PART FOUR

The Process

Decide before you build. Test with checks that are allowed to say no.

CHAPTER 14

Decide Before You Build

> The most expensive design mistakes happen before the first line of code. A designer opens a tool, starts placing boxes and finds out four days later that nobody agreed on what the page was for. We fill in a one page design brief first. No brief, no build.

The Design Brief

Every new site starts with a short brief. It is not a strategy deck. It is a list of decisions, each one a single line. Our build tools will not let a new site go live until every line is filled in and the finished first screen matches it.

The Job	The business, and the one thing a visitor should do
The First Screen	The one object, where the light comes from, the layout, the moving detail, the phone layout, how it bleeds into the next section
Reference	A real, approved design to learn from, and exactly what to take from it
Three Directions	Three layouts that truly differ, and which one was picked
Tokens	Page color, card color, ink, muted ink, accent, font, sizes, margins, gaps and corner rounding
Exact Copy	The eyebrow, the headline, the offer and both button labels, word for word

Writing the exact copy before the design changes everything. A headline that is four words long and one that is fourteen need different layouts. Designing around placeholder text means redesigning later.

Three Directions That Differ

The first idea is rarely the best one. It is just the first one. So we sketch three directions for the first screen, and they have to differ in layout. Color alone does not count. One might put the object center with the headline low on the left. One might split the headline either side of the object. One might put a dashboard or a product card rising out of a photo.

Pick one. Then change one thing per pass. Changing five things at once makes it impossible to tell which change helped.

Tokens Before Pages

Tokens are the named values that every page shares. The page color, the ink color, the accent, the font, the sizes and the spacing steps. Set them once, at the top, and use them everywhere. When the owner asks for a slightly darker blue, you change one value and every page follows.

Tokens also make dark mode, wide screens and future redesigns much easier, because the decisions live in one place instead of scattered across hundreds of rules.

Building With AI

AI tools can build a page in seconds. Left alone, they build the same page every time. Dark background, glowing gradient, three cards with icons, a row of numbers, a cream and clay palette, a quirky font. It is the average of everything they have seen, which means it looks like everything.

The fix is to decide before you generate.

1. Fill in the brief and the tokens yourself.
2. Hand the tool a real, approved design as a reference and say exactly what to take from it.
3. Ask for three directions that differ in layout.
4. Keep one. Change one thing per pass.
5. Finish with exact edits by hand.

Treat the AI like a fast junior designer. Great at producing options. Not the one who decides.

THE RULE

Decisions first, pixels second. A brief you can finish in thirty minutes saves days of redesign.

Build the First Screen First

Once the brief is set, build in this order. The one object, then its colors and type. Then the grid and the navigation. Then the background and the frame. Then the object and its light. Then the words and the buttons, lined up with the frame edges. Then one small detail that adds context. Texture last.

Do not start the second section until the first screen passes the two second check from Chapter 2. A strong first screen sets the standard for the rest of the page. A weak one gets copied all the way down.

DO THIS TODAY

- [ ] Write a one page brief for your next page, using the six headings above.
- [ ] Write the exact headline and button labels before anyone designs anything.
- [ ] Sketch three first screens that differ in layout. Pick one.
- [ ] If you use AI to build, give it your brief and a real reference, not a blank prompt.

CHAPTER 15

Measure the Render

> Almost every bug that reached one of our live sites was invisible in the code. The style sheet looked right. The script looked right. The page, as a real person saw it on a real screen, was wrong. So we stopped trusting the code and started measuring what actually shows up.

Look at the Real Thing

Before any site is called done, someone looks at the live page in a real browser at three widths. A phone at 375 pixels, a laptop at 1440 and an ultrawide at 3440. Not a design file. Not a preview tool. The live page.

Then a set of checks walks the page the way a picky visitor would.

- Every visible line of text is checked for contrast against what is actually behind it, including see through layers, in both light and dark mode.
- Every bit of text is checked against the 14.5 pixel floor.
- The page is checked for anything wider than the screen.
- Every link on the page that jumps to a spot further down is checked to make sure that spot exists. Most link checkers skip these.
- Every block of structured data is checked to make sure it reads correctly. All of them, not a sample.
- Every form is sent for real, and every phone link is tapped.

Checks That Can Fail

A checklist that never says no is not a checklist. It is a ritual. Our launch checks are built so they can stop a launch, and they do.

On new sites, our deploy step runs a design gate. It stops the launch if the design brief is blank, if the built page does not match the brief, if the first screen fails the scan at any of the three widths, if any text fails contrast, or if a fresh review of the first screen scores it under the bar. Only the owner of the company can override it, and every override is written down with his words.

> **THE RECEIPT**
>
> A single deploy from an old copy of a site once wiped a day of work. The last deploy wins, and the copy on that computer was days behind the live site. Now we check that the copy being edited is the one that is live before any change goes out. It takes thirty seconds. Skipping it once cost a full day.

The Launch Checklist

Every site goes through the same list before it is called live.

1. The design brief is filled in and the first screen matches it.
2. The first screen passes the two second check at 375, 1440 and 3440.
3. All text clears 4.5 to 1 contrast and 14.5 pixels.
4. Every phone link rings the right line.
5. Every form sends a real test that arrives. The test is then deleted.
6. Nothing scrolls sideways at any width.

7. The page works with motion turned off and with scripts turned off.
8. Page titles follow the pattern of place, service and phone, and every service page description includes the phone number.
9. Structured data describes the business truthfully and every block reads correctly.
10. The site answers on one address only. The plain and www versions both forward to the secure main address.
11. There is a real page for addresses that do not exist.
12. Analytics counts calls, quote taps and form sends as key events.
13. The site is submitted to Google Search Console and Bing Webmaster Tools with a sitemap.
14. No placeholder facts remain. Any fact marked unconfirmed blocks launch.

One Address Per Site

That tenth line catches more sites than you would think. Many hosts answer a site on both the plain and secure address, and on both the www and bare version. To a search engine that can look like four copies of the same site. Every one of our sites picks one address, the secure bare domain, and permanently forwards the others to it.

After Launch

Launch is the start. Once a month we read the numbers for every site. Which kinds of pages earn clicks from search, which designs turn visits into calls, and what kinds of content get picked up by AI

search features. Then we change the rules to match what the numbers say. The rules in this book are the result of doing that, over and over, for years.

THE RULE

Measure what the visitor sees, not what the code says. Then let the check say no.

DO THIS TODAY

- [ ] Open your site at 375, 1440 and the widest screen you can find. Screenshot each.
- [ ] Run a free contrast checker on the lightest text you can find.
- [ ] Type your domain with and without www and with http. All of them should end up at one address.
- [ ] Copy the launch checklist and run it on your current site. Fix the first item that fails.

KEEP THIS PAGE

The Built to Ring Checklist

> Hand this to anyone who builds your site. Every line should be a yes.

The First Screen

- [ ] One object a visitor can name after two seconds
- [ ] Headline names the problem and the place
- [ ] One offer line
- [ ] One loud button and one quiet button with plain verb labels
- [ ] Its own phone layout with both buttons above the call bar
- [ ] No sliders, stat rows or text on busy photos

The Look

- [ ] Light page unless the brand truly calls for dark
- [ ] Brand color taken from the logo, two accents at most
- [ ] Darker brand shade for buttons and links
- [ ] All text at 4.5 to 1 contrast and 14.5 pixels or larger
- [ ] One plain font family, headings in Title Case
- [ ] Real photos of the real crew and real work
- [ ] Nothing scrolls sideways
- [ ] Every moving thing has a job and respects reduce motion

The Machine

- [ ] Every phone number is a tap to call link that rings the right line
- [ ] Lead forms ask for name, phone and need, with phone required
- [ ] Every form tested with a real submission
- [ ] Every review quoted word for word, every claim linked to its source
- [ ] Mobile speed tested on the live site, heavy parts load on scroll

- [ ] Its own palette, layout and features, no template footprint

The Process

- [ ] Design brief filled in before any page
- [ ] Checked live at 375, 1440 and 3440
- [ ] One address, secure, bare domain
- [ ] Calls and forms counted as key events
- [ ] No unconfirmed facts at launch

SOURCES

Where the Rules Come From

Most of this book comes from our own builds and our own mistakes. Where a rule rests on an outside standard or law, these are the primary sources.

- Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.2, contrast minimum. w3.org/TR/WCAG22
- Google Search Central, spam policies, including scaled content abuse. developers.google.com/search/docs/essentials/spam-policies
- Google Search Central, Core Web Vitals and page experience. developers.google.com/search/docs/appearance/core-web-vitals
- Federal Trade Commission rule on the use of consumer reviews and testimonials, 16 CFR Part 465. law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/16/465.2
- Federal rules on telephone and text solicitation, 47 CFR 64.1200. law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/47/64.1200
- Media query for reduced motion. developer.mozilla.org/docs/Web/CSS/@media/prefers-reduced-motion

Nothing in this book is legal advice. Rules on texting, calls, reviews and privacy change and differ by state. Check with someone who knows the rules where you work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Limpert

Anthony Limpert founded Clickflame in 2004 in Long Beach, California. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Computer Science from the University of Akron. Clickflame builds websites and runs search marketing for local service businesses, from mechanics and roofers to locksmiths and law firms, with one goal on every project. Make the phone ring.

Clickflame also makes Smoke and Receipts, a show about the gap between what marketers claim and what they can prove. This book is the first in a series under the same name.

Free lessons that go with this book are at learn.clickflame.com. The free PDF of this book lives there too.