culturehive

Case Study

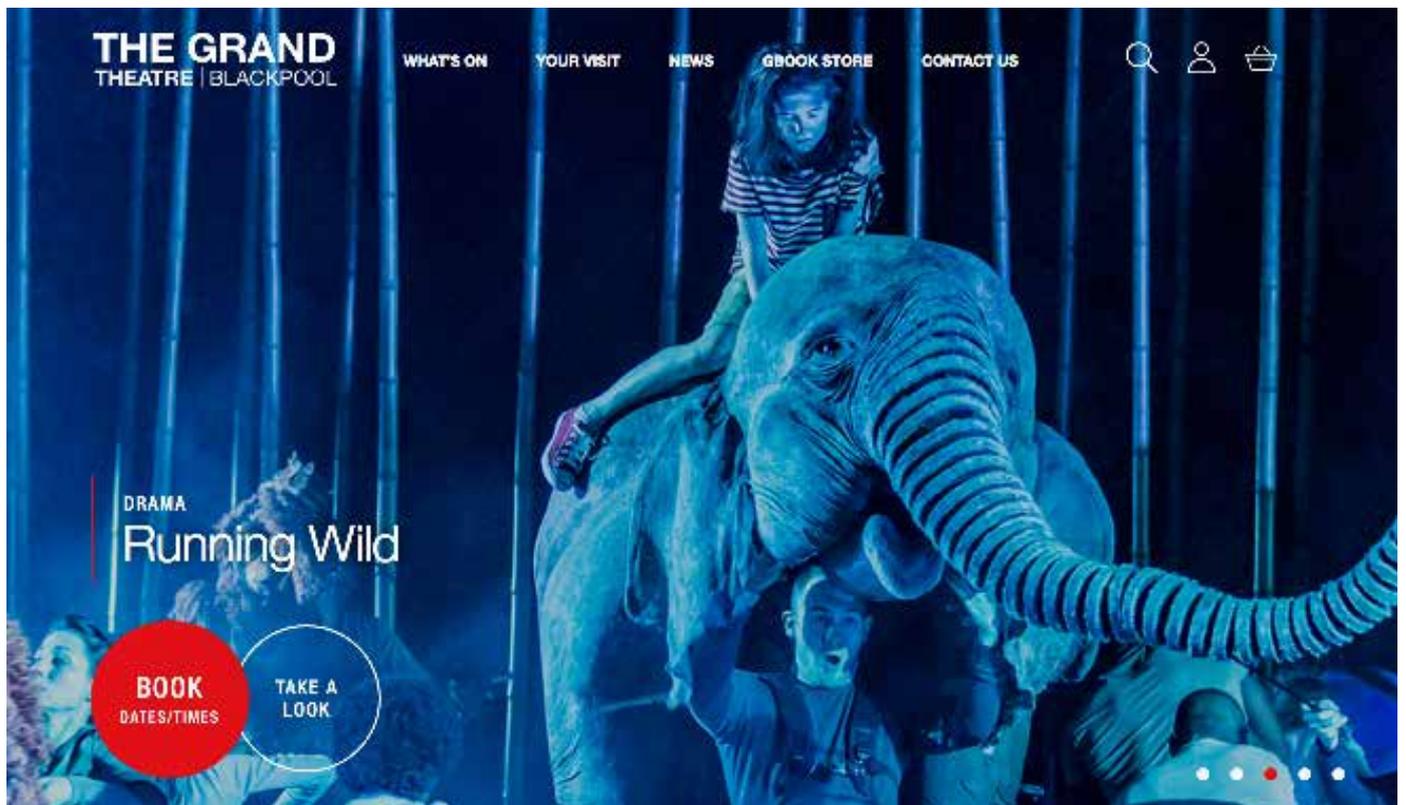# The Grand website development

Author: Andrew Howard, The Grand Theatre Blackpool
With tips from Markerle Davis, Soap Media

The Grand Theatre has increased ticket sales, visits and email subscriptions by focusing on the user experience.

Case Study:
Andrew Howard, The Grand Theatre Blackpool
Markerle Davis, Soap Media

The Grand website development
enhancing the user experience

About The Grand Theatre Blackpool

Blackpool Grand is one of Britain's premier heritage theatres. The Grade II* Listed Matcham theatre is in the top 8 per cent of all listed buildings in England.

Reopened in 1981 after volunteers saved it from demolition, the theatre presents a full range of every performing artform.

### Background to the development

When our new Chief Executive, Ruth Eastwood, started at The Grand she prompted a review of our marketing materials. She asked us what we wanted to do with the next brochure. We said we wanted it to be clean with more white space so it was easier for people to read. We changed the design and the reaction was fantastic.

We wanted to apply the same clean, accessible and user-friendly principles to the website. By putting our audiences' needs first, we hoped to improve the user experience and increase engagement and ticket sales as a result.

About Soap Media

Soap Media is an award winning web design and digital agency with a high performance track record since 2005.

The team work with many household names including The AA, Blackpool Pleasure Beach, Booths Supermarkets and American Golf.
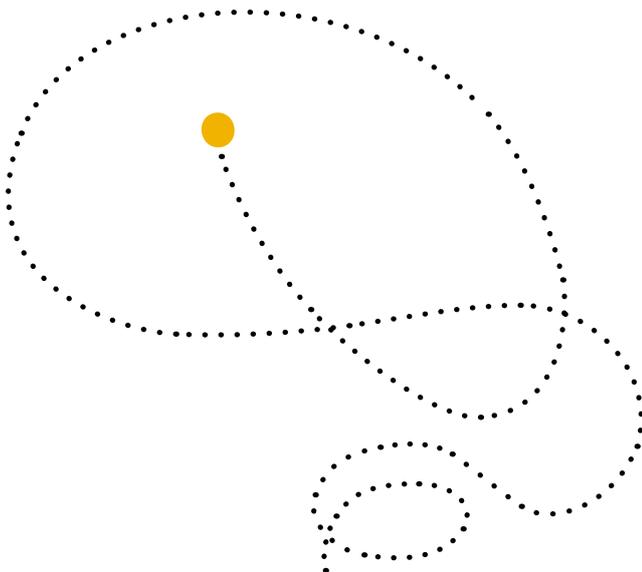
Looking for inspiration

We began by looking at theatre industry websites. We looked at 80 - 100 theatres. We found there was often too much information and the visuals suffered as a result.

We wanted to strip it right back and use strong visuals to represent the visual nature of our industry.

Selecting a company

We contacted companies we were interested in working with and invited them to tender. We asked them to look at our new brochure and respond to it. We wanted to find a company that understood what we were trying to achieve.

We invited three companies to pitch with homepage and showpage designs and selected Soap Media.

Ideas development

Soap Media tip: 'Take time out of the office to focus and generate ideas.'

We spent a day in a treehouse creating personas and thinking about who uses the website. It was an important process to define the audience for the site and to focus on their needs.

The key question that we discussed informed the entire project:

When your audience come to your website what do they want to see?

Tips from Soap Media

Develop personas - use them to understand how your audiences will use the website.

Think about who your current audience is and who you want it to be. Are they the same?

Research

Soap Media tip: 'Don't make assumptions about what your audience want. Look at the evidence and ask them.'

We began with Google Analytics. We looked at what content people were actually looking at. We identified the most popular pages and those where bounce rates were high.

Soap Media also introduced us to conversion tracking software Hotjar to gain a more in-depth view of behaviour.

We then sent an email to our audience asking for people from different backgrounds, matching our personas, to get involved. Rather than asking them to complete a survey, we invited them in so we could delve in more. We asked about the information they wanted, we tested different design features and learnt a lot about how they would use the site.

Managing internal demands

Soap Media tip: 'Show people facts and figures to avoid ego-based decisions.'

Armed with evidence of what our users wanted, we had to manage internal expectations. We had lots of debates about navigation; everyone wanted their content on the top menu.

We were very clear that the website was to serve and to sell. 'Does it need to be there?' became our mantra.

We prioritised the content that our research told us was important to our users: what's on and visitor information.

Other content was still uploaded but existed more so that it could be linked to from social media or specific documents. We reached an organisation-wide agreement that if pages weren't being viewed or used then they would be removed.

Tips from Soap Media

Study Google Analytics - look at bounce rates for particular pages. Where are the problem areas?

Set up a buying funnel to track user journeys through your site. Where are the drop off points?

Use a tool like Hotjar to give you in-depth analytics including heatmaps and visitor recordings - it's free to use if you're within their pageviews limit.

Developing the site

Soap Media tip: 'The mobile site is often an after thought. Begin with mobile and your site will work well across all devices.'

Once we'd agreed the key content for the site we started looking more thoroughly at user journeys.

Our research had shown that 65% of the traffic to our website was from mobile devices. The site wasn't responsive and it was slow, which hampered the user experience.

Soap Media took a mobile first approach to developing the new site to make sure we were creating the best possible experience for mobile users.
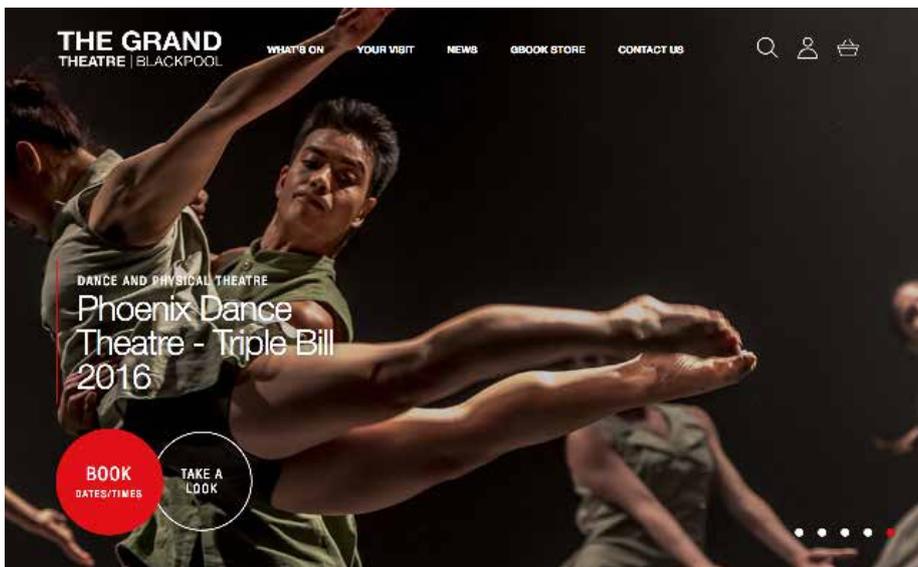

Tips from Soap Media

Look at how people are using your site and on what device. Is your site optimised for that use?
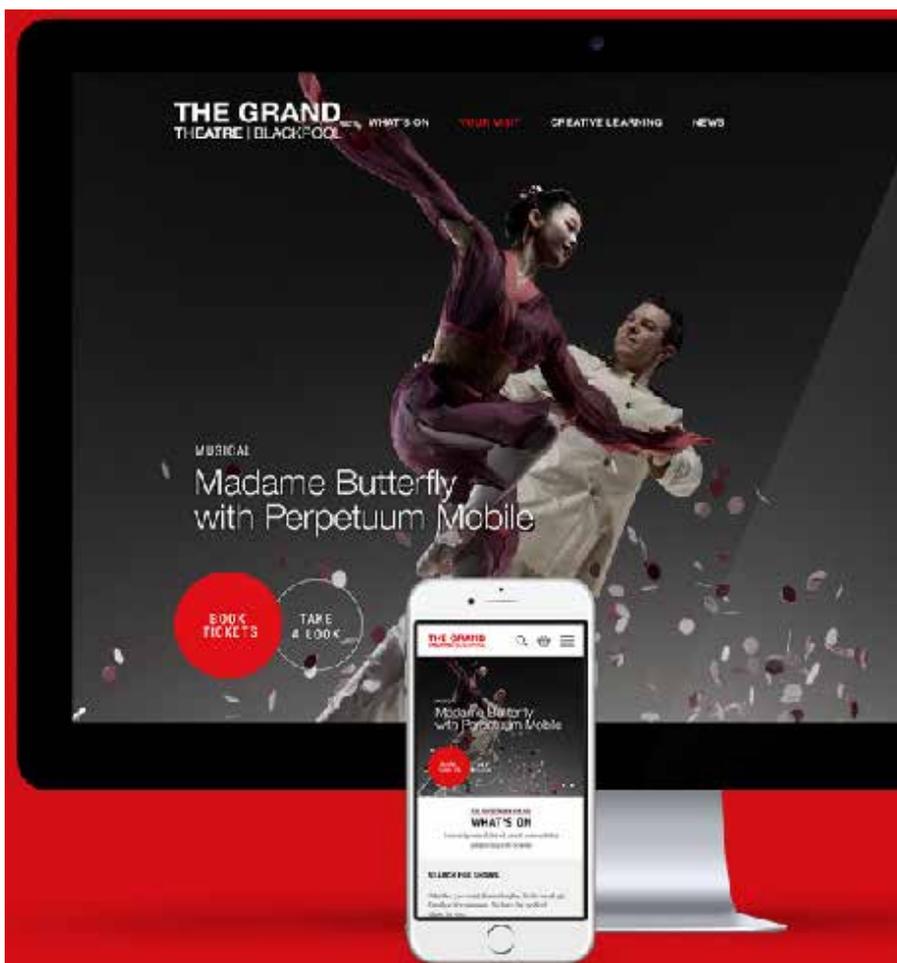
We stripped back the homepage so the top menu featured the primary content our audiences wanted to see.

We balanced the needs of different audiences by featuring a mixture of family shows, contemporary drama and murder mysteries or other popular shows.


The main purpose for audience members using the site was to find out about events so we made it easier for them to search from the homepage. It now features a large calendar as well as this week, this month and browse all buttons.
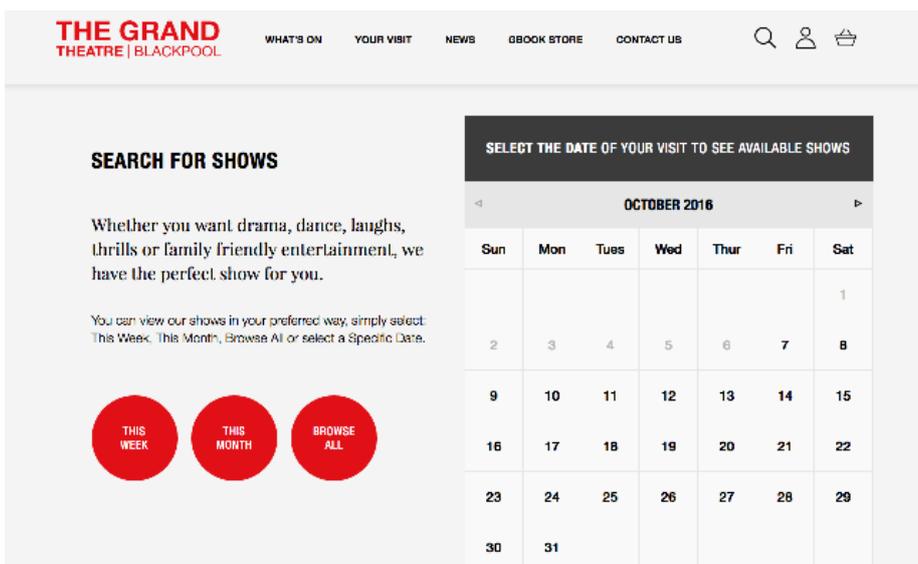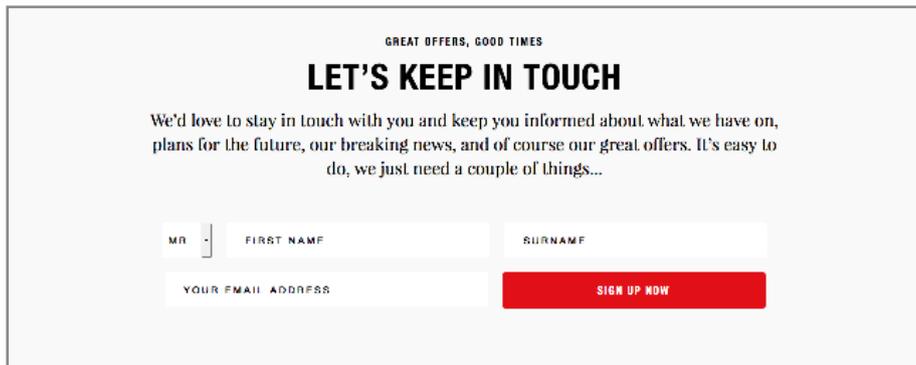
Soap Media worked with Spektrix to link browsing history and customer purchase data to create a recommended for you section on the homepage.
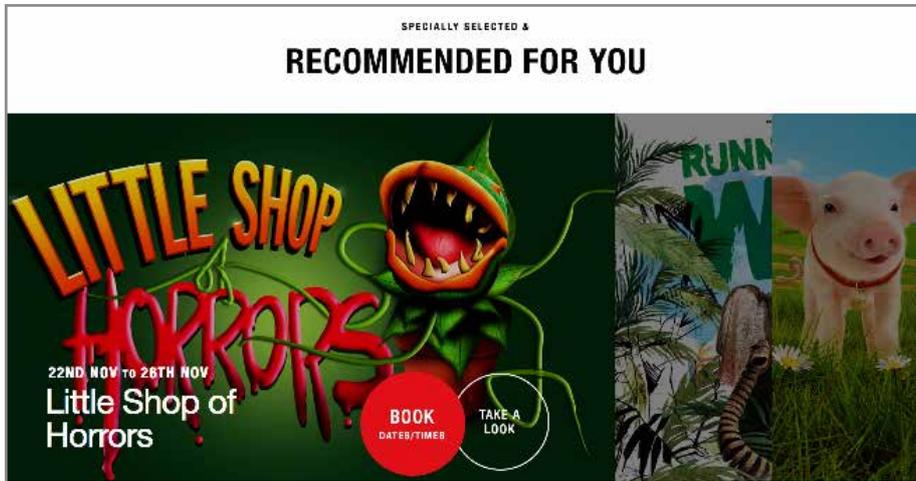

We made it easy for our audience to keep in touch with simple email sign-up forms on the homepage and throughout the site.

Additional information sits at the bottom of the homepage to avoid it interrupting the core use of the site.
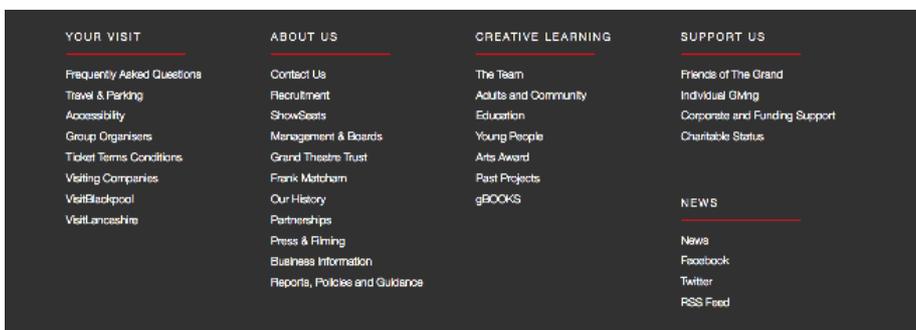
Research from the old site revealed a high bounce rate on the What's On page. Soap added faceted search options to help users refine their search and find shows that interest them. The filters include date range, which is perfect for holidaymakers visiting Blackpool within a specific time period.
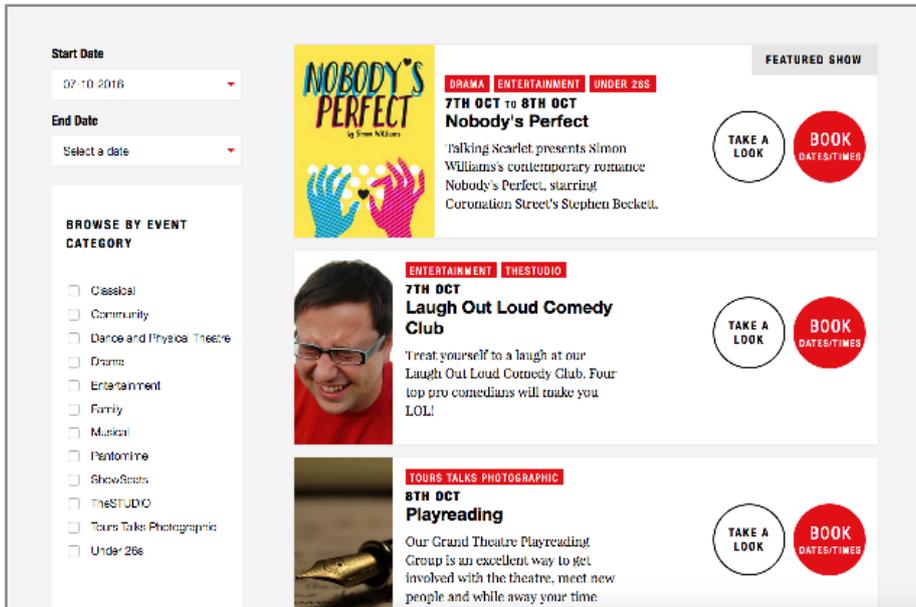
Analytics from the old site also proved that the most popular pages, and those most likely to convert to ticket sales, featured video and strong visuals. The new site features big bold videos and images wherever possible.

New features

Soap Media tip: 'Think about how you can make the journey more useful - for the user and for your business.'

Once we had applied what we had learnt from our research, we started to think about other ways to make the process more useful.

Soap added Remind Me and Add to Calendar features to event pages. These enable potential audience members to set reminders to book tickets after pay day or once they've checked availability with friends. We can then email reminders with the latest show content to convert that initial expression of interest into a booking.
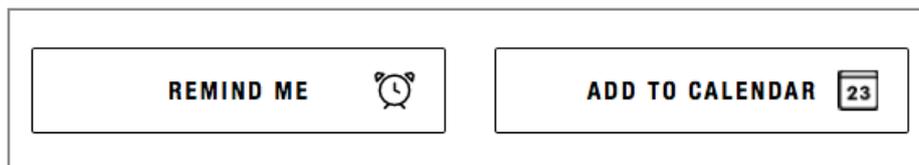
We also addressed social sharing. Soap made us think about why people would share information about a show. As marketers, we're always keen for the public to promote shows for us but what's in it for them?

We introduced 'Shout out - you might win' and the response has been incredible.
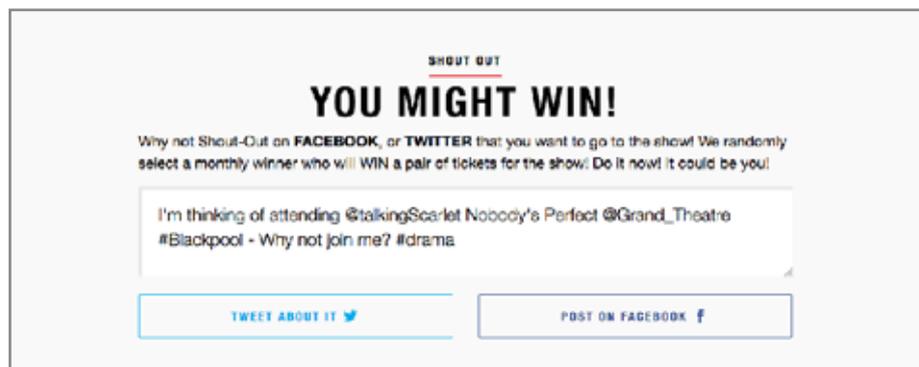
Facebook and Twitter followers have increase by 4,100 and 3,300 people respectively.

Tips from Soap Media

Incorporate social proof. Get people talking about your site and include show reviews. People are more likely to believe something will be good if there's evidence other people like it.

Incentives are key. Give people a reason to buy or to do something that will help you.

The impact

Since the launch of the new website we have achieved:

- 20% increase in website users
- 163% increase in pageviews
- 49.7% increase in dwell time
- 61% increase in number of visits from mobile devices
- 57% increase in email subscribers
- 38.5% increase in online donations
- A reduction in bounce rate from 60% to 8.7%

These results have contributed to a 12.9% increase in ticket sales income.

Final word from The Grand

We have had a great reaction to the website. The key learning for us has been that you can't make it simple enough. Simplicity, a clear structure and a focus on the user experience have been essential to the success of the site. Cleverness should be in the backend of a website and the front should look and feel simple.

The content on the site is more engaging, with a stronger emphasis on videos and visuals.

Stripping back all the additional content has made it easier for people to find what they're looking for. They feel comfortable on the site and are willing to browse for longer as a result.

Users can sign up to the e-list from anywhere on the site. The resulting increase in email capture has enabled us to build stronger relationships with our audiences.

We plan to invest in the website each year so the incredible impact it has had continues to grow.

Tips from Soap Media

Use Google URL builder to track any campaigns that link to your website. This allows you to identify campaigns in Google Analytics and see what's working.

Keep monitoring, testing and changing things. There is always more you can do to improve your website.

For more information

View The Grand case study on Soap Media's website

Visit The Grand website