

Designing an Effective Web Site

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Introduction

If you search for “Web site design” on amazon.com or barnesandnoble.com, you’ll find literally thousands of books on that subject. Amazon.com, alone, has 1462 books available on that very subject.

There’s also a plethora of information available on the Web regarding effective Web site design: killersites.com, coolhomepages.com, [CNET’s builder site](http://CNET's_builder_site), etc.

You’d think that with all the resources on the Web and in print that explain the elements of effective Web site design, that every business would be have a “killer site”.

Not so. You only need to take a look at a few of the Web sites on the Internet that deal with poor Web site design to figure out that there are a lot of sites that are poorly designed.

So, what are the basics? What do you really need to know in order to design an effective Web site for your company? This white paper is an attempt to get down to the nitty-gritty – the real elements of effective Web site design.

Know your audience

Before designing and developing the Web site, the most important consideration is your audience. After all, it’s your audience that you’re trying to communicate with. Your audience and their needs are what should drive the design and content of your Web site.

You need to ask yourself some key questions about this very important group of people:

- ❑ Who is your audience?

What role do they play within their business? For what purpose are they going to be visiting your Web site?

- ❑ What is important to your audience?

What information is important to your audience? Purchasing agents are going to be interested in different information than CEO’s, for example.

- ❑ What are their technological limitations?

What is their connection speed to the Internet? What browsers and versions are they using? Thankfully, today, the list of potential technological limitations of your audience should be minimal – most business people connect to the Internet by way of a T1 connection and most companies make certain that their employees are using the latest versions of the most popular browsers. But, there may be exceptions, and you need to be aware of those.

Know what you want to convey

When it comes right down to it, Web sites serve one purpose and one purpose only – they are a means of communicating information to your audience.

When designing a Web site for your company or business, the **minimal** information you want to provide on your site falls into three categories:

- ❑ Company contact information.

The address, phone number, fax number, and location of your corporate office and any other divisions, subsidiaries, or satellite offices. You may also include names, phone numbers, and email addresses of key people to contact within the company (company recruiters, technical support staff, etc.).

- ❑ Information about your company.

This may include a brief history of the company, the company's mission statement, biographies of top company management, management philosophy, and employment information (including job openings, job descriptions, and information on employment benefits).

- ❑ Information about your company's products or services.

There's no better place than your Web site to tout your company's products and services. If your company offers products for sale, the information you provide may include a product description, features and benefits, information on how to purchase the product, product demos (especially popular with software development companies), etc. If your company is service-oriented, provide information on the services your company provides. This information may include information about the specific service, who to contact for further information, customer testimonials, etc.

Sounds simple, right? You can design your company's Web site in no time. After all, you just need to provide the above information, right? Well, you could do that, but I wouldn't advise it. One thing you must keep foremost in your mind: Content is "King".

Content is "King"

In today's competitive market, it's simply not enough to attract visitors to your Web site only once. You want repeat visitors to your site. Simply put, you want to keep

your audience coming back for more. With this in mind, what are some of the ways you can generate repeat site visits?

- ❑ Provide relevant content.

Here's where knowing who your audience is and what they want comes into play. Business people are often busy and pressed for time. They're not going to take the time to visit your Web site unless you offer them information that is important to them.

- ❑ Dynamic is better than static.

Your audience is not going to visit your site repeatedly if the content of your site never changes. Let's face it – who wants to read the same information over and over again?

Keep your Web site up to date with current information. Is your company releasing a new product? If so, update your Web site with information about the new product, as it becomes available. Do you offer white papers or articles on your Web site? If so, add new ones frequently. Keep the content fresh and interesting.

Now that you know your target audience and know the information and content you wish to provide, the next thing you should consider is how to present the information to your audience.

Presentation

- ❑ Make it easy to navigate.

Your audience wants to know the answers to two key questions, no matter where they are within your Web site: Where am I? Where can I go from here? So, don't keep that information a secret. Many of the business-to-business and business-to-consumer Web sites on the Internet today make use of hierarchical menus. Hierarchical menus are a good way of making sure that your audience is never lost in the maze of your Web site. Remember, if you let your audience get lost and confused, they won't hesitate to find the exit.

If you're designing a large Web site with multiple layers of information, providing a site map and a means of searching the Web site is always a good idea. If you examine some of the larger, more heavily trafficked Web sites out there ([Microsoft](#) and [CNET](#), for example), you'll find that they offer both comprehensive site maps and full text search capabilities. If all else fails, their audiences can always rely on these two features to find the information they need.

- ❑ Use small, professional images.

If you're not a graphics designer, don't try to design your own graphics. Use the services of a professional graphics designer. Clean, small, professionally designed graphics can make all the difference in the look, feel, and viewer

experience of your Web site. Busy Web site viewers simply don't have the time or patience to wait for large, cumbersome images to download.

- ❑ Eliminate excessive scrolling.

Your audience should not have to scroll horizontally or vertically to read the information presented on a page. Try to keep scrolling to a minimum by making use of hyperlinks to additional pages. If you wish to provide a lengthy article or white paper on your Web site, save it as a PDF file so that your site viewers can print it for easier reading.

- ❑ Optimize for all resolutions.

Most business people use 800x600 as their standard screen resolution. However, many business people don't know how to set the resolution on their monitors. The common phrase found at the bottom of many Web sites, "This site optimized for 800x600 resolution", means nothing to a lot of people. Your best bet is to make use of simple scripting technologies to detect the Web site viewer's browser and display your site accordingly. This ensures that your Web site always looks professional, no matter which screen resolution your audience sets their monitors to.

- ❑ Make it easy on the eyes.

Have you ever visited a Web site with impossible-to-read fonts, a multitude of graphics, and garish colors? How much time did you spend looking at that Web site? You probably immediately navigated to a different site to save your eyes!

When designing a Web site, use easy-to-read fonts. Avoid serif style fonts and stick with sans-serif fonts designed for easy readability on the web. Arial, Verdana and Helvetica are three good choices.

One of the worst design mistakes that you can make is to use a multitude of graphics simply because you can. It's true that a picture is worth a thousand words, however, make sure your graphics make sense, are tasteful, and professionally designed.

There should be consistency between your company's print literature and marketing material and your company's Web site. Use the same company colors, graphics, and logos on your Web site as those used in your company's marketing material, in order to convey a unified image of your business.

Additional considerations

- ❑ Make sure your audience can find you.

Have the URL to your company's Web site printed on all business letterhead, business cards, marketing and promotional literature.

Spend the money to register your Web site with the top search engines, such as [HotBot](#). Also, register your site with the top hierarchical indices or Web crawling search engines, such as [Yahoo](#). In order to do this, you need to

determine the title of your Web site, a one-paragraph description of your business, a list of keywords you expect site viewers to search for, and the categories your Web site should be listed under.

Make sure all the pages on your site have a complete title within the title tag. Make use of meta-tags to store keywords that you expect site viewers to search for.

- ❑ Test, test, and retest.

Make sure your Web site works. There's no excuse for broken links or pages that don't display correctly or take too long to download. Web surfers are a fickle lot. If you can't keep your Web site up and running smoothly, your audience will go elsewhere for the information they need.

- ❑ Keep an eye on your competitors.

No, not so that you can plagiarize and copy their Web sites... You definitely don't want your company's Web site to look exactly like one of your competitor's Web sites. But, in a way, it is important to "keep up with the Jones's". If your company is a software development firm, for instance, and one of your top competitors starts to offer their customers Web-based support on their Web site, you might want to look into implementing the same technology on your Web site.

Conclusion

Wow! That's a lot to think about. Is all this really necessary?

Yes, it is. Consider the statistics. There are an estimated 109 million hosts on the Internet today. Out of those 109 million hosts, roughly 33% are .com domains. The majority of .com domains are occupied by businesses. If you're going to spend the money and the time to design a Web site for your business, you might as well be one of the better sites out there. And, if you follow the simple elements of effective Web site design, you've got a good chance of achieving your objective.

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