

GETTING BUSINESSLIKE ABOUT WEB SITE DESIGN

Is your company doing everything on Heidi Dangelmaier and Scott Davidoff's list of site-design essentials?

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May 25, 2001 — Have you ever stopped to ask yourself this question: If you dressed like your Web site, would you ever close a deal?

You don't take a meeting at Goldman Sachs in a sweat suit and expect to make a sale. You also don't show up in a tuxedo. And if you're off to pitch Madonna, you'd best reconsider that Brooks Brothers outfit.

Successful salesmen craft their clothing to optimize the sale. They understand that their visual identity affects how their message is received. The same rule applies to your Web site.

Design directly impacts business. Strong design excites and compels. Generic design condemns you to anonymity. Off-target design sends the wrong message. Cheap design is a turnoff. Bottom line: Design can make or break the sale.

Bad Web design is a world wide epidemic.

Fortunately, this epidemic has an antidote called accountability. Apply it across your organization, and start treating design as a serious business component.

CEOs: Your strategy is only as strong as its execution. Design plays a key role in realizing and strengthening that strategy. Give design a high priority when allocating resources or assessing market impact.

Marketing: Your Web site exists to drive your target market toward a measurable action. Evaluate design by how well it educates, engages and motivates your customers. A Web site does not live in isolation; it must be integrated with the rest of your brand. Remember that designers can't succeed in an information vacuum. Take the time to educate and involve your designers, so they thoroughly understand your brand.

Designers: You have the responsibility to creatively lead your company to a stronger market position. You hold its welfare in your hands.

The memo below is an appeal to everyone in the Internet business who wants to improve their online effectiveness. If we educate ourselves, apply better strategy and tactics, and improve quality control, our waning success is reversible:

To All —

It is time for design to evolve.

We have followed assumptions and trends that did not serve our clients or their customers. We gave way to artistic temptations and "cool" tools that sidetracked our primary agenda.

Professional design does not highlight the capabilities of the medium but uses the medium to highlight the clients' capabilities.
Hard questions need to be asked. What is the value — or liability — of special effect-driven Flash intros?

Are we losing prospects during bandwidth delays? If we needed a preload delay, could we have conveyed something more purposeful than artistic interpretations of the word "loading?" If the value proposition isn't articulated within two clicks, does the customer abandon interest?

Did that QuickTime video — for all the visitors that couldn't see it — enhance the message? Or would a strong illustration have been a smarter alternative?

Design, animation, illustration, video and sound only have value when they lubricate the steps to a prospects' commitment or facilitate strategic business goals.

Web site design also needs to reassess its importance in the impact and definition of brands.

Why have we designed so many logos that are derivatives of Moviefone and Lucent? Are these iconographic associations part of the brand strategy or artistic shortcuts?

Is the overuse of templates and stock photos diluting companies' ability to compete? Do we need to expand our definition of visual branding to encompass not only navigation but also the actual content of the page?

Does the Web experience make a statement on the credibility, utility and usability of a product? Does a product interface make a statement on the credibility and value of a brand?

The commonplace use of the word "redesign" is testimony that design is operating on autopilot — accepting failure. Would other industries tolerate this

track record? Would you ever go back to a dentist that had to redo the same filling every year?

How can we turn this trend around? We start by laying two critical foundations.

First, designers must thoroughly understand their clients' products, the competitive landscape, the customer's psyche, the company's current position, the turf they want to claim and the key communication agendas. This knowledge forms a strategic plan that informs and guides all design decisions.

Second, designers must learn how to intelligently apply technology. They must comprehend the issues and techniques involved in making the medium perform its best — ergonomics, utility, timing, platform, browser and display variations, bandwidth cost and user tolerance — so their creative capacity remains nimble and powerfully delivers on the strategic plan.

But the value of your creativity must always be measured against and adjusted to satisfy some basic criteria. During the design process, always ask and objectively answer:

Is the site so visually powerful that it will rise above the mass of market noise? Have you put aside your own preconceptions to ensure the visual personality resonates with your target market?

- Do the visuals complement and reinforce the product's core messaging?
- Does every pixel lead the prospect one step closer to becoming (or remaining) a customer?
- Do you spare the user a thousand words where one picture would have sufficed?
- Have you made it easy to get the critical facts?
- Does the navigation separate your markets and lead them to more refined, targeted messages?
- If the customer only makes it to the home page, will they know what you offer?
- Will they grasp what makes you competitive?

Keep your eye on the bottom line. Does the Web site incite the customer to take action — make a phone call, volunteer demographic and contact information, forward a URL, set a bookmark?

These questions and processes outline the first steps in evolving design towards integrity, quality, rigor and maturity.

Designers are not decorators. They are a key part of the business team. When everybody owns this truth, companies will increase their profitability.

P.S. Design doesn't bear sole responsibility for the tumult of the Internet. It is just one of the business components that needs reassessment for the Web to survive and thrive.