

Web Design and Usability

Yvonne Doll, Creative Director

“If it ain’t broke don’t fix it.” (Proverb)

“Creativity is allowing oneself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.”
(The Dilbert Principle)

These are two of my favorite quotes that I think describe good web design in a nutshell. Proven techniques combined with the play and innovation of the creative spirit.

For some, the significance of web site design is as foreign a concept as proper courtroom attire is for Michael Jackson, or college is for Tommy Lee. For web site users, bad design can be confusing and discourage them from returning to your site. That’s why for web site owners, design, and more accurately design for usability, should command their attention.

You see, all kidding aside, a web site design that is well thought out and built with respect to your visitors stands a much better chance of building loyal users, engaging visitors and ideally converting users to customers. Although it may seem that design is something that is subjective and emotionally driven, there are many web design tenets that have become standard, based on proven theories and commonalities in user behaviors. With these tenets, facts and proven theories, we can determine the “rules” that dictate what works on the web.

People make decisions about your business based on everything about your web site: the images, the tone, the overall experience and the content. They want to know what makes you unique. What makes you stand out? This is sometimes a tough question to answer, but it’s an important ingredient in the success of your design. You have your own tone, your own essence. You offer a service in your own way. Incorporating these elements into the visual language of your site will help you rise above the clutter and will make the difference between just having a web site or a having web presence.

Communication is Key

Are you speaking the same language as your key audience? Every web site, regardless of industry, succeeds or fails to engage its audience for the same reason – communication.

A web designer’s job is to make sure that you are getting your message across to your target audience by understanding how people are looking at your web site, what they are looking for, and how they will use your site.

A successful web site is like a good conversation, a free flowing exchange of information between the web site owner and the web site’s visitor. Your site strikes up the conversation with text and imagery and the user responds with mouse clicks and keystrokes.

The better you are able to communicate your message via a distinct visual language, the better your user will understand what you have to offer and why they should stick around, check out your site and interact with it.



AltmanWeil.com

A web site that is successfully designed for usability should be simple and easy to use, It should meet the users' expectation at every click, they should feel they know what they can do, how to do it and that they've come to just the right place!

If a scientist is looking for an attorney specializing in FDA law, and you are an FDA lawyer, that scientist should be able to find the information they need, but they should also feel that you understand what it means to be a scientist submitting to the FDA.



Writing your web site's job description.

From the standpoint of the web site owner, a web site should be designed with the owner's business goals ALWAYS top of mind so the design and all of it's elements are geared toward those goals.

As a web site owner, you should be able to identify your web site's job description. Why do you have a site? What is its intended function? What skills does it need to have to complete it's tasks? You should know who is coming to your site and why.

You should also be thinking about what you like and what appeals to you when you are on other web sites.

- What can you then use to appeal to your customers?
- What makes your business better than your competition?
- How have you reflected that on your site?

The answers to these questions will help you avoid ending up with a web design that is "just another pretty face."

Three Prongs of Design for Usability

There are three prongs in the web design process that are interdependent on each other for a truly successful web design: organization design, presentation design and interactive design. Stellar visual communication drives the success of all three.

Organization Design

Some people limit design to just what their web site looks like – picture, colors, etc. But other key design elements are organization, meaning, how your page is laid out, and how your customer finds information.

We mentioned a list of questions that you should be able to answer about your site. Your visitors, on the other hand, shouldn't have to work so hard. They should be able to answer these simple questions:

- Where am I?
- How did I get here?
- Where can I go from here?
- What is this site about?

"Order is the shape upon which beauty depends."

-Pearl Buck

"Good designers can create normalcy out of chaos; they can clearly communicate ideas through the organizing and manipulating of words and pictures."

-Jeffery Veen

If your visitors can answer these basic questions from any page in your site, you have solved 75% of the most common

usability issues.

Organize With Your Site's Goals in Mind

Think about the goals of your site and organize your site toward those goals. If your goal for users who visit your site is to fill out a contact form or sign up for a newsletter, a good designer will design every page of the site with that directive in mind, constantly pointing users in that direction, using contrast, balance, page element hierarchy, and even white space to define a clear focus on the page.

Presentation Design

People make decisions based on everything about your web site, not only the information on the site. They want to know what makes you unique. What makes you stand out? If your answer to those questions is “nothing” you may want to think again. You have your own tone, your own essence. You offer a service in your own way. Incorporating these elements into the visual language of your site will help you rise above the clutter and is the difference between just having a web site or a having web presence.

How you present the information on your web site is equally as important as what you are presenting. Poor quality imagery, “out of the box” or “templated” designs and herky-jerky layouts all have direct impact on how your site and the quality of its information will be perceived.

Well-executed and professional graphics all help visually articulate your message. Striking the appropriate tone for your site and fine tuning the non-verbal communication all help the user get an instant idea of what your company is about.

“Style is the feather that helps the arrow fly, not the one you put in your hat.”
 -Steven Heller, *In Design/Style*

Color

Color gives sites personality, helps define tone and mood, and reinforces your brand identity. Color can also create visual unity throughout your site, letting people know they haven't strayed from where they intended to be. Color selection, because of the tone it evokes, is an important decision in any web design process.

Because of our basic, human, emotional ties to color, it's important to choose the right one for your site. Do you want to project a tone that is warm and relaxed? Consider using sage greens, muted blues or earthy tones. Do you want to appear to be powerful and cutting edge? Black is often perceived to be the color of authority and power; red is perceived as the color of movement and excitement. Should your web site have a serious tone? Should it be modern? Lighthearted? Conservative? Color can help you convey a specific message to your users non-verbally.

The power of color

Color is a very emotional thing. People react very strongly when it's used in a deliberate way. Take the example of the “Pink Locker Room” controversy. Visiting teams to University of Iowa's stadium are hot under the collar as their locker room has been painted a shade of pink that is often found adorning the walls of young girls' bedrooms. So imagine, huge college footballers trying to get pumped up for a game, in their powder pink locker room. If you are not sure about the subtle emotional effect of color, Google the pink locker room and see how much controversy it's causing. ESPN, *The Washington Post*, and countless blogs have picked up the scent of this story and have much to say on the subject!



The Famous Pink Locker Room

Pictures

Attention to detail when using photographs is very important. A photo should serve a purpose. Photos of people reflective of your target audience can help you connect with the user and add some friendliness to your site.

Keeping load times small for your web pages usually means scaling photos down. Use caution when relying on photos or screen shots to convey complicated ideas. And don't forget visually impaired users or those on slow connections often disable the images all together when surfing the web, so don't rely on imagery alone to get across important ideas.

Interactive Design

Design does not end with the creation of the look and feel of a site. The web designer is also in charge of making sure the user's interaction with the site (their path) is clear, logical and easy to use.

When visitors see certain elements on your web site (buttons, navigational elements, links) there is an expectation of what will happen when they interact with those elements. "When I click this button, I expect a form to be submitted. I also expect a thank you page to appear to confirm my submission."

You have to be sure that the implied interactions in your design meet the expectation of the user.

Pay careful attention to not only what the user's task list is on your site, but how they will complete those tasks, (i.e. pull downs, check boxes, buttons, hyper links), and how your site will react to the interaction. All of these elements will make your site easier to use.

"A little simplification would be the first step toward rational living."
-Eleanor Roosevelt

"Wisdom consists of the anticipation of consequences"
-Norman Cousins

Some Interesting Facts About Color

Blue

In darker shades, it's been known to increase productivity.

Overall, men prefer blue to red; women prefer red to blue.

One of the most common colors for web sites.

Green

Muted tints of green have a calming, neutral effect on human nervous system.

This is why the waiting room for performers are often painted a muted green, and referred to as "The Green Room."

Yellow

Perceived as being fast – one reason many why a lot of taxis are yellow.

High energy – can quickly become overwhelming on screen.

General

Almost two-thirds of consumers won't shell out for a large appliance unless it comes in their preferred color.

(Source: study House & Garden magazine, March 2004)



Prairie.org: Simplicity, emotional impact & the perfect image.

Design to Standards

A good web design should be usable by the majority of web surfers regardless of web connection speed, browsers, platform or monitor size. This is where web standards come in. The World Wide Web Consortium has established a set of guidelines called “web standards,” designed to ensure long-term viability and ease of use for greatest number of web users.

Using cascading style sheets (CSS) to build your site allows you to separate content and layout. Your site will be faster, more flexible and easily adaptable to many formats. CSS also allows you to arrange your content in a way that makes your site more appealing to search engines. In addition, the U.S. Federal Rehabilitation Act section 508c compliance provisions state that public sites and public accommodations must be built so that the code is understandable by people using assistance devices like screen readers. CSS makes complying to this standard much easier.

In an ideal world, where the creation of all sites is held to these standards, the web would be a much more “user friendly” place. But when taking on any project, it’s important to consider first and foremost the needs of the client. If the site is eventually going to be handed off to an internal staffer who is not up to speed on CSS, they are in for a painful, and possibly costly, transition period. That being said, using CSS is a great investment in the future of your site and your business. At Duo we are 100% committed to bringing our clients up to standard at a pace that works for them.

“Progress is the activity of today and the assurance of tomorrow.”
- Ralph Waldo Emerson

There are many web sites that compile browser statistics from different samplings of web users. We can learn some general guidelines from these statistics which help in creating sites that are the most usable to the largest number of people. A good web design should not be dependant on a particular browser. That being said, some general statistics can help you make decisions about what types of coding technology to include on your site and what types of information they can contain, how much screen space you want to use, etc.

According to TheCounter.com, December 2005 more than 80% of Internet users are using Internet Explorer version 6 and higher. More than 75% of users have their monitors set at 32bit color quality, and 75% have their resolutions set at 1024x768 or higher.

It’s important to note here that, although most of your visitors may be using a high screen resolution, 25% of people are still using 800x600. That’s still a relatively high number. If you designed to 1024x768, 25% of your visitors wouldn’t see large portions of your web site’s home page without scrolling. In order to minimize confusion and maximize user experience, designing to 800x600 is still the safest approach.

Resources for browser statistics:
TheCounter.com
(<http://www.thecounter.com>)

W3CSchools.com
(http://www.w3schools.com/browsers/browsers_stats.asp)

On the other hand, if you are creating a web site for say, accounting students, and you know your user base are young, seasoned internet surfers with newer technology, you may find that the percentage of your users whose monitor settings are set to 1024x768 is more like 95%. So in your case, the “safe” 800x600 may be an unnecessary constraint. Use the global statistics and the stats from your web logs to make an informed decision on how you’ll build your site.

Unified Behavior Model

As mentioned earlier there is enough information and research out there to create a reasonable framework that users have come to understand. There is a framework that has been developed, and they should not have to “relearn” how to use your site.

These proven “best practices” from the global web experience allow web designers to focus their innovation in areas where they can really help improve the user experience. In other words, don’t reinvent the wheel.

If you were a sports car designer and built a car with “D” on the stick shift for Reverse instead of “R,” you’d confuse people and there would be some really ticked off drivers with dented cars looking for you.

Here are some basic positioning elements that resonate well with many users:

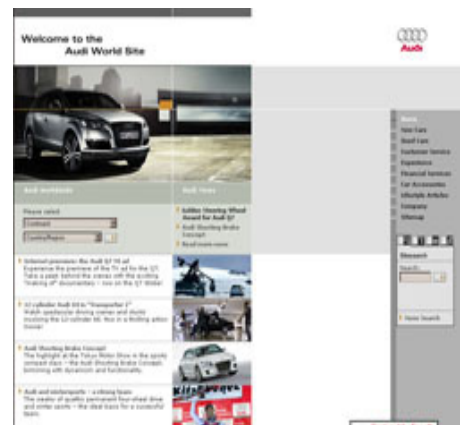
- Users generally expect to see a logo in the top left-hand corner of the screen, and expect it to link back to the home page.
- The most popular area for a search box is generally in the top right corner.
- Many users scroll to the bottom to find contact or employment information.
- People also expect links to be a different color than the surrounding text or underlined.
- They even look for orange RSS boxes to indicate that they can receive feeds of their favorite blogs.

We’ve mentioned that users are used to seeing a navigation that is across the top of the screen or down the left-hand side, but it’s possible to use something different and still create a useable but unconventional layout. It could stir people’s curiosity and prompt them to pay closer attention to your content. Usability testing will help you know whether or not this is something that will work for your visitors.

Audi.com is a good example of a site that went against the norm with their unique navigation and layout (pictured right).



McDermott Will & Emery:
unified behavior model in action.



Audi.com

They used right rail navigation and left a huge chunk of whitespace in the center of the screen. The search function is centered in the primary focus spot for visitors. The image of the car takes up a good deal of screen real estate to give the site emotional impact and focus the user on what Audi.com's purpose is- to convince you that you need this car!

Eye Tracking

Eye tracking is a method of tracking people's eye "path" while looking at a website. The data is then analyzed to reveal patterns that can help web designers make good decisions on placement.

A common eye tracking path shows user's eyes travel from the left top of the screen, hovers in this area, then moves left to right down the page. It's important to not only consider the eye path, but also the "hot spots" on the page where the user's eye may hover. A hot spot may not be the first thing they see, but if the eye remains there longest, they may have greater chance of retaining that information.

The web is fluid, and a web site is really never finished. Get comfortable with these two ideas, and then let your web site do the talking. Be ready to listen to what your users are telling you through good web site metric tracking tools. The tools alone are good but they still need to be told what to measure. A good web designer will include code in the design that will point web metrics tools in the right direction when tracking your site.

Usability Testing

Usability testing is a good idea for anyone launching a site and is simply testing your users prior to launch to identify weaknesses in your site. By surveying a few of your target users you may learn valuable information about what works on your site and what doesn't. (And by doing so prior to launch you have a chance to fix what doesn't work before the rest of the world sees it!)

Know the audience you are designing for. If most of your users are older customers for example, it would be wise to use a large font and clear, standard navigation. If you are trying to sell hair gel, you want your site to appeal to Billy Idol but you don't necessarily want to alienate Newt Gingrich. (You never know; he may be looking for a good hair gel). Find a happy medium – if possible.

"Observe Everything.
Communicate Well.
Draw, Draw, Draw."

*Frank Thomas , Disney Animator, on
giving advice to animators*

Break These Rules!

We've reviewed a number of guidelines for web site designers, but keep in mind that some rules are made to be broken. You can break a few rules here and there like Audi did and have a site that is unique and interesting to your visitors. The trick is to find a balance between what is unique and interesting and what is working toward your goals and provides a useful and user-friendly tool to your visitors.

Design for usability is attainable! If you need help finding a working balance between design and function on your web site, give us a call.