

Never Redesign Your Web Site

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“We want to completely redesign our web site”.

If I had a penny for every time I heard that, well you know the rest. In the web design business, that’s all I ever hear, with the additional comments of “the sites just not working”, “customers are having trouble finding things”. Many of these customers had web sites that they redesigned on a regular basis, some customers completely redesigning their sites from the ground up every few months (or even more often), especially back in the heyday of the internet.

I’m here to tell you how often you should completely redesign your web site: Never. Not even once.

Why you ask? To illustrate, let me tell you a story about another famous interface re-design you may have heard of.

Back in 1995, a major software company was coming out with a new version of their operating systems software. It was a complete redesign of their software from the ground up, including interface. They spent countless millions promoting it and marketing it, including hiring the Rolling Stones to sing the theme song (Guessed the company yet?). While initial sales were good, the main market they were trying to hit, the corporate user, was slow to catch on. Why? It wasn’t that the software was pricey, its wasn’t that the software was hard to install, in fact the company had provided a number of tools to easily upgrade current users en masse to the new software version.

What’s was the problem? The technology was sound; the software was less buggy than the previous version, the tools for corporate deployment were there.

The problem wasn’t the software. The problem was the wetware, or the humans who would be using the software. The training costs to re-train users on the new software far outstripped the costs of the software implementation, and therefore the total cost of the “redesign” was far more that originally expected. It took many years before the operating system was fully accepted into the marketplace.

Since then, that company has learned their lesson. They no longer completely redesign their user interface: it’s not revolution, its evolution. If you look at the interface they have just recently released,

it's the same basic interface, but it looks better. The major changes are under the hood, not in the user experience.

Which comes back to the web: what is a web site but a user interface? Learn from the billions the aforementioned company spent in creating and promoting their software and don't redesign your site.

But you say the interface isn't working now: we have to redesign. Take a good long look at your site: hire someone else to analyze it, ask for feedback from your customers. Is it scalable and expandable as is? Does it really need a whole new look and feel?

No one likes changes, your customers least of all. After all, they have been using your site for a while now and unless it's completely unworkable, derive some value from it. So, unless the design is extremely bad, don't start from scratch. But if you must start from scratch, remember this:

Users don't want something new. They don't want bells and whistles. They don't want flash. They don't want animated graphics that serve no purpose and distract them from the task at hand. Users want to hit a site, perform a task, and get out. Make it swift and easy. Most of all: don't surprise the user.

What you need is an initial new design: not a RE-design. Remember, Never Redesign your site.

Put some thought into building an initial design model that works, that's scalable and expandable. Design an interface that you can add stuff to, since there is always more that you need to add. Design an interface which doesn't force you into physical limitations (like using a horizontal navigation bar then running out of space when you want to add that last button). Start with a good design: then simply evolve it.

OK, you're allowed one redesign, but that's it. But before you write one HTML command or redesign that graphic, build out a map or task flow of what the users wants to do, or what you want the user to do when they visit your site. Look at the task flow and revise it so that the user can take the steps with the minimum amount of clicks. Make it easy and intuitive for the user. Edit your task flow ruthlessly, removing any extraneous elements that distract from that flow.

Run it past your customers, get feedback, revise until it's as tight as it can get, then you can go ahead and built it. It might sound like a lot of work, but you will never need to redesign your site again, and that will save you time, money and headaches as your site evolves.

Chris Kalaboukis is CEO of SwapSmarts: <http://swapsmarts.com> where over 1300 advisors provide advice on anything from business to realtionships.

Chris has 17+ years of experience in internet, information technology and business development with web design, wireless, high-speed internet, cable television and entertainment firms.

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