

Why Design is as important as Promotion

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We have all heard that there's no use having the best site in the world if you don't promote it, and submit it to the search engines.

Well the opposite is also true. There is no point in promoting your site unless it is well designed and going to trap your visitors.

With over 125,000 home-based online businesses starting each week, internet surfers have such a choice and have to wade through a sea of information to find what they want - and they are more likely to be trapped by a professional looking site than one that looks homemade.

Now a professional looking site does not have to be filled with the latest technology, graphics and Java applets which take up space and time to download, however it does need to take account of a few website design aspects overlooked by many homebuilt sites.

1) The site must load fast, since not everyone has a 56K telephone line and a Pentium III processor, especially outside the US. The most common mistake made here is not optimizing the graphics, and any image over 30KB is probably too large.

2) Websites look different on different browsers (not only between Internet Explorer and Netscape, but also between different versions of these browsers) and different platforms (PC and Mac). What may look great on one browser may look unprofessional on another.

The statistics at The Counter.com show that a wide variety of browsers and platforms are used. Stats show 77% of users use IE5.x, 9% use IE4, 9% use NN, and a minority use other browsers (March 2001 - source <http://www.thecounter.com>). One more interesting statistic is that around 20% of browsers have Javascript unknown or disabled. At <http://www.anybrowser.com/siteviewer.html> you can see what your site looks like in different browsers.

3) Websites also look different on screens with different resolutions. A website designed on a 640x480 screen will look different on a 1024x768 screen.

4) Some companies with large networks restrict downloads from the internet (to protect their intranets), so any technology such as Flash which needs plugins, might not be visible to some company employees.

5) It is very important to understand what the TITLE and META tags do, since these play a very important part in your website ranking on the search engines. It is surprising how many websites have no TITLE or META tags. More information on these tags can be found at our search engines basics page - http://www.thewebseye.com/search_engine_basics.htm

6) The site must be easy to navigate so that a visitor can find what they are looking for with one or two clicks.

7) Lastly and probably most importantly, the content of the site must be good. Not only must it be good, but also it must offer a benefit to the visitor. The content must be interesting enough to either make the potential customer buy on the spot, with the use of compelling headlines or banner ads, or it must give them a reason to return.

If you are maintaining your own website, keep it simple. It is then that much easier not to fall into the design traps mentioned above. Here are some tips that could improve your site design while maintaining a professional look.

1) Use background color in tables instead of graphics to add color to your site.

2) Make use of percentages instead of absolute values in tables for width and height values, but then again check that the final result looks OK. This allows your web pages to stretch to fit the browser screen.

3) Use CSS style sheets to keep your site uniform. There are excellent tutorials on how to use style sheets at House of Style - <http://www.westciv.com>

Using style sheets is as easy as putting an image in your site. You simply link each of your pages to the style sheet. Then if you want your whole site to use a different background color or a different font, you only change the style sheet. Style sheets can greatly simplify the HTML on your pages.

4) If you are using graphics for your site navigation, make sure you also include a text menu (near the bottom of the page is a good place). This is because a) some search engines have problems following graphic links (especially JavaScript and image maps) and b) some people turn off graphics on their browsers so make sure that you also use ALT tags to describe navigation buttons.

5) Don't use fancy fonts that you have downloaded from the net because unless they are supported on your visitors' browsers, they will not be seen. Keep the fonts simple.

Finally, put yourself in the shoes of your target audience, and ask yourself if your site gives you a reason to browse further. Using strong headlines and compelling text is more important than special effects and large graphics.

The best websites from a marketing point of view are often the simplest.

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