

# Does Your Website Induce Seizures?

By Tim Knox

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Small Business Q&A  
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Q: We promote our web site in all our ad campaigns, but according to my website statistics program, we are getting very few visitors who click past the first page. The site has a cool Flash intro page that the designer said would impress visitors, but it doesn't seem to be working. What can we do to get people to spend more time on the site?  
-- Christopher O.

A: The first thing you should do, Christopher, is find that designer and beat the living Flash out of him. It won't increase the time visitors spend on your website, but it will make you feel better after you've read this column.

What your designer thought would appeal to visitors is probably the very thing that is driving them away. A Flash introduction page (Macromedia Flash is a software program used to create animations for Web pages) may seem "cool" to you, but from a website visitor's point of view, they can be about as appealing as sitting in the front row of a Pokemon movie with four hundred screaming six year olds (and here comes the segue, folks).

In December, 1997, during an episode of Pokemon, the popular

Japanese TV cartoon that has spawned everything from movies to action figures to lunch boxes, a scene featured a rocket explosion that flashed red and blue lights in rapid succession. After the episode, over 600 children were taken to hospitals complaining of seizures, blurred vision, headaches, dizziness, and nausea. Any adult who has ever been exposed to Pokemon for more than two seconds can understand the nausea, but the seizures at first baffled doctors. Scientists ultimately came to attribute the mass reaction to "photosensitive seizures," which are brought on by exposure to certain visual stimuli like rapidly flashing lights on a TV screen. Remember when your mom told you not to sit so close to the TV or you'd ruin your eyes? Turns out she knew what she was talking about. Who knew?

The event caused such concern that Japanese broadcasters and health officials met to discuss ways to prevent future occurrences of bad-cartoon induced illnesses. They established guidelines for the broadcast of flashing images: no image may flicker faster than three times per second; flashing images should be displayed for no more than two seconds; and stripes, whorls, and concentric circles should not take up the largest portion of a TV screen.

It's my humble opinion that these rules should apply to websites as well. I've been in the Internet design business for nearly a decade and I have been witness to numerous websites that could induce photosensitive seizures in blind moles. It sounds like your website might be suffering from a similar ailment.

If visitor's are not clicking past your fancy Flash intro page, you don't have to be a genius to figure out that therein lies your problem. Remove the Flash intro page for a few weeks to see if your website's click-through rate improves and the number of page views increase. "Click-through rate" refers to the number of visitors who click links on your homepage to go deeper into your site. "Page views" refers to the overall number of web pages that were viewed by visitors. If click-through and page view rates improve, you'll know that the Flash intro was your problem.

Here are a few other things you can do to make sure your site offers visitors a pleasant - and seizure free - browsing experience.

#### Sit In The Visitor's Chair

The best way to make sure your website is as user friendly as it can be, is to sit down at a computer and approach your site from a typical visitor's point of view. Try to imagine that you are seeing the site for the first time. If you are unable to do this, have a friend who has never seen the site click around and offer comments while you take notes.

Have your friend assess the following points: Is the site appealing to the eye? Are the colors pleasing and complimentary? Is the

site easy to navigate? Are the topical categories and subcategories in logical order? Is it easy to find what you're looking for? Does the site have a search engine to make finding things easier? Is every feature of the site less than two or three clicks away? If the answer to any or all of these points is no, you have some work to do.

#### Don't Dictate Technology

One sure fire way to repel web site visitors is to require that they have special browser plug-ins or 3rd party add-on browser software installed to view your site. Dictating that the user download and install software is not your place and users will resent you (and your business) for it. Visiting your site should be an effortless pleasure, not a technological chore.

#### Don't Make Them Wait

If your homepage takes longer than 20 seconds to download (appear in the visitor's browser) you are losing visitors, period. Gratuitous animation, large graphics, poorly formatted HTML, bad page layout, and a number of other factors can increase download time. You might have the greatest web site in the world, but if it takes ten minutes to download no one will ever see it.

The lessons to be learned, then, are threefold. One: a website should be designed to satisfy the visitor's needs, not to pacify the site designer's ego.

Two: visitors to a business website are not there to be awed and entertained. They are there looking for information, and unless you give it to them quickly and effortlessly, they will go elsewhere to get it.

And Three: for better mental and physical health avoid Pokemon at all costs.

Here's to your success.

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Small Business Q&A is written by veteran entrepreneur and syndicated columnist, Tim Knox. Tim serves as the president and CEO of three successful technology companies: B2Secure Inc., a Web-based hiring management software company; Digital Graphiti Inc., a software development company; and Sidebar Systems, a company that creates-cutting edge convergence software for broadcast media outlets. Tim is also the founder of OnlineProfits4U.com, an ebusiness dedicated to the success of online entrepreneurs.

Tim is also the Ebusiness Startup and Design Expert for Entrepreneur.com, the website of the national publication

Entrepreneur Magazine.

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