

# Dead Trees

A PUBLICATION OF  
QUESTIONABLE VALUE FROM  
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COMMUNICATIONS

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## Down in front!

If the options are “lead”, “follow”, and “get out of the way”, choose “follow”. That may seem to be an odd sentiment for someone who calls himself a website architect. You’d think I might want to lead.

*“Be not the first by whom the new are tried,  
Nor yet the last to lay the old aside”*

Alexander Pope wrote those words in the 1700s, but they should resonate in today’s websites, too. To me, Pope’s words suggest that it’s foolhardy to be the first to adopt new technologies, but you don’t want to wait too long, either.

Personally, and for the weekly *Technology Corner* radio program, I do adopt a lot of new technologies. Some of them have worked out well. Others have – well, let’s just say that some haven’t been entirely successful.

As a website developer, I consider it important not to jump on the newest technologies. Several years ago, Java was going to be the next big thing. (Important distinction: I’m talking about Java, not Javascript.) All the leading websites had Java applets that could take minutes to load.

One of the most popular Java applets scrolled text in a box that looked like a 1950s theater marquee. It was a cool (or is that “kewl”?) effect, but – besides taking a long time to load – it made the text virtually unreadable. You don’t see that effect being used much these days.

## An absence of ugliness

Several years ago, Rick Altman came up with a phrase I liked. Rick claims not to be a professional designer and says doing “beautiful” work is a challenge. Instead, he aims for an “absence of ugliness”.

I liked that the first time I heard it because it reflects a pragmatic approach to design – a down-to-earth, practical outlook that works well when it comes to working with websites.

It’s easy to forget this when you’re excited by some new trick. Then you build something that’s fascinating but useless. Some of the largest ad agencies in the world fall in to this trap when they design ads to win awards. The award-winning ads are almost always failures in the marketplace.

**No matter what you like, your website doesn’t work unless the visitors say it works!**

If your page doesn’t display useful information within 10 seconds, visitors who have come to your site from a search engine will choose the next link. If your page doesn’t display useful information within 30 seconds, even a dedicated visitor will probably give up and go elsewhere. The main (home) page

should load almost instantly and all other pages should either load quickly or give the visitor a good idea about how long the wait will be.

## OK, it’s time for Flash now

Within the past 6 months, I’ve started using Macromedia Flash animations on my websites. Enough people have fast (cable, DSL, or LAN) connections that I know a modest size Flash file will load in less than 10 seconds. Equally important, more than 99% of all Internet users have the Flash player installed. I still won’t even think about creating an all-Flash site, but I won’t rule that out, either.

In an effort to build a better website, I consider it important to make an attempt to understand the audience. The content and the technology of a site that’s created with 20-year-olds in mind will differ significantly from a site that’s designed for managers of Fortune 100 companies. A website that’s intended to promote a new blockbuster movie won’t look much like a financial consultant’s website.

Unfortunately, there are far too many variables. The person viewing your website may be using an iBook with a 12-inch screen running at 1024x768 (tiny text) or a Windows machine with a 22-inch screen running at 640x480 (enormous text). The browser might be Netscape 4, 6, or 7. It could be Internet Explorer 4, 5, or 6. It might be Opera or Mozilla or Konqueror (on a Linux machine). Each browser has certain bugs that affect what the user will see on the screen.

And you can’t depend on any browser to have any particular typeface available. You may prefer Zapf Elliptical Book Text, but if you specify it for your website, most visitors won’t see the page the way you see it. For sites that are visited mainly by Windows users, you can expect Times, Arial, Georgia, and Verdana to be available. But that’s it! On the Mac, you can expect a similarly small set of faces to be present on most computers.

## What the heck is this?

Dead Trees is the William Blinn Communications newsletter. It’s published whenever I feel like it, although I generally feel like it when I’m preparing the month’s invoices. If you didn’t receive an invoice with this newsletter, kindly contact me and we’ll rectify that situation. Please note that despite the name, of the publication, I bear no particular animosity toward trees. The name is simply an acknowledgment that paper is made from, well, dead trees.

The safest specification is simply either of the generic faces: *serif* or *sans-serif*. This essentially allows the computer to decide. But which should you specify?

There's still considerable debate among developers and designers over what kind of typeface is better. Research clearly suggests that, on paper, a serif face (such as **Times**) is more readable than a sans serif face (such as **Helvetica**). But the Web isn't delivered on paper. It comes to you on a computer monitor.

- Print is high resolution, but the screen is low resolution
- Print uses reflected light, while the screen uses transmitted light.
- Paper doesn't flicker, but the screen does.
- We don't scroll a newspaper, but we do scroll a screen.

**These differences affect the choice of typeface.** Initially I wrote that these differences "may" affect the choice of typeface, but how could they not have an effect? If you're not convinced of that, you might as well stop reading right here!

### Show me the proof, chum!

Research and the opinions of developers are beginning to support sans serif faces for websites. According to usability.gov (part of the National Cancer Institute) "Changes in vision that occur with age can make it more difficult to read a computer screen. These include reductions in the amount of light that reaches the retina, loss of contrast sensitivity, and loss of the ability to detect fine details." The institute's conclusion: Use a sans serif typeface, such as Helvetica, that is not condensed. Avoid the use of serif, novelty, and display typefaces.

South Africa Internet marketing firm InterComm says "sans serif faces work best in electronic media – websites and presentations. This is because the serif tends to be diagonal – and diagonals on screen become jagged. The more 'square' the typeface (like Tahoma), usually the better it looks on screen. Simple typefaces with no 'curlicues' usually look best."


According to the Center for Health Policy at Stanford University, "sans serifs tend to produce a modern feel, and are frequently incorporated in professional design today."

And research from the University of Wisconsin at Madison suggests "sans-serif fonts have enhanced height and width to make each letter stand out more on the screen. In addition, they lack the additional detail of a serif font, which demands for attention when reading on the screen."

It's possible to find significant sentiment for serif faces on websites, too, but none of the references I found in several hours of looking cited any current research. Most cited Colin Wheildon's *Type and Layout* (1995), which was limited to calculating readability on paper.

People who know a lot more about research than I do question Wheildon's methods, even for paper-based publications. I remain convinced that Wheildon's conclusions are correct for books, magazines, brochures, and the like, even if the research methods are flawed. But the research and the conclusions don't apply to text that is delivered on screen.

I'm not the first to suggest using sans serif faces on websites. In fact, I used to strongly recommend using serif faces. I'm now ready to accede that the opposing view is the correct view.

When the client allows it, I now use sans serif faces on websites. And that means I will not be *the last to lay the old aside!* 

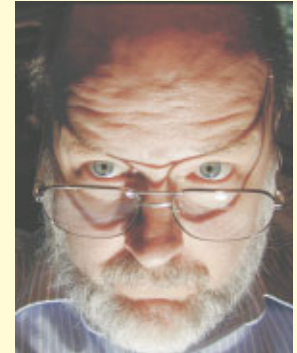
Newsletters, leaflets, books, newspapers ...

They're ALL a **SNAP**  
with Ventura Publisher.

## My desktop is full

**First** there was the typewriter. That was followed by the word processor, then desktop publishing and desktop audio production. Before long, we're all going to be video producers.

While that's a bit of an exaggeration, it doesn't miss the mark by much. New computers are arriving with DVD burners built in and people who want to add a DVD burner can do so easily. Software and hardware are available to capture both digital and analog video and to edit it.



### Booster rockets for home movies

Remember 8mm home movies? When I was in high school, some friends and I borrowed a camera and made a "feature length" movie. I think it was about the length of a "B" movie (20 minutes) and had even lower production values. When my older daughter was born, I bought a Super 8 movie camera (with sound) and an editor. I patched together some movies that nobody has watched in 20 years.

And then came video. Home movies were all on VHS (or Betamax) tapes. Editing? The quality was marginal to begin with and, because audio and video are analog on VHS, every generation of editing got worse.

Being able to capture these old analog videos, edit them, and write them out to a DVD (or a video CD) is just what a lot of people have been waiting for. The new Multi-Format DVD recorders and players eliminate some of the compatibility problems. Most of the pieces are now in place for people to start editing.

### Make yourself a star

If you have a reasonably fast PC, you can add a complete video editing suite to your home – not for \$250,000. Not for \$100,000. Not even for \$250. How about \$50? Or if you want a slightly less capable program, \$30?

This is not the kind of software you'll find in a \$250,000 video suite. You won't find time codes. You won't find the high-end features that would allow you to create video for CBS, but you're not creating video for CBS. You're creating video for your own use at home. For that, there are already several inexpensive products on the market today.

Hardware? You can find a DVD recorder for under \$300 and, if you want a drive that handles more than a single format, even those are available for under \$400. 