

Dead Trees

A PUBLICATION OF
QUESTIONABLE VALUE FROM
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COMMUNICATIONS

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It's a website, not a beauty contest

While it's probably true that most successful websites aren't ugly, they need not be beautiful, either. Several years ago, Rick Altman (the force behind CorelWORLD, where I am presenting this topic, and overall Corel Draw guru) 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 a "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 the client is impressed with all the latest technologies and then you fall into the trap of building 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.

It works when the visitor says it works

As with "generally accepted accounting procedures", there is some room to navigate within the standards of "good website design". That's one reason design rules aren't effective: What works for a site that's designed to sell prescription discounts to seniors won't be effective at a site that's intended to attract teens to the latest action movie. And vice versa.

Even so, there are several generally accepted annoyances – problems that every website designer should avoid:

Hiding critical information

For me, this is often a physical address, a phone number, or an e-mail address. I'm constantly amazed that this information is either not provided at all or that it's hidden 5 layers deep. Put this information on every single page.

Not saying what you think you said

As with any other kind of communication, it's the communicator's responsibility to be certain that the receiver has understood the message. Before releasing a website to the public, let several people who haven't been involved in the project read it and then fix contradictory, incorrect, or confusing information.

Slow downloads

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.

Dead links

Designers can buy a program that checks links or pay a service that checks links periodically. These are good investments. Broken links infuriate visitors and they weaken a visitor's trust. If the designer isn't careful about checking links, how accurate is the rest of the information on the site?

Three critical rules

If you abide by these three rules and design your site with these three rules firmly at the top of your mind, you'll have a good website even if it causes some purists to retch.

- Rule #1: Know your audience.
- Rule #2: Know your audience.
- Rule #3: Ignore all rules except rules 1 and 2.

Eight "unruly" rules

On the other hand, there are many "rules" that have become part of the Web's "conventional wisdom". Each of these "rules" makes sense much of the time, but it's wise to remember author George Orwell's opinion of grammar rules: *Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.* So it is with this list of "rules":

- You must design your site to fit an 800x600 screen.
Or 640x480. Or 1600x1200.
- You must use only Web-safe colors.
- You must avoid Flash animations.
- You must not display large images.
- All text must be text, not graphics.
- Every image must have an ALT tag.
- You must support version of every browser on the planet.
- You must use a serif face! Or a sans serif face!

Each of these "rules" has a place, but that place is not in every site. Flash animations, even huge ones, might be right at home on a site for artists. If 95% of your visitors use one particular browser, there's little need to support all the others.

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.

All the pretty browsers

Here's where it gets "interesting". PCs outnumber Macs by something like 8 to 2 (or maybe 9 to 1) so for most sites, the designer will want to be certain that everything works on common Windows browsers. For a site devoted to Macs or any site with a high percentage of Mac users, this will be reversed.

But even on a PC, it's possible for someone to be using an antique browser that has a lot of bugs (Explorer 3 or earlier, Navigator 4 or earlier, Opera 4 or earlier). It's probably no surprise that Microsoft's site looks its best on Explorer 6 or that Netscape's site is optimized for Navigator 7.

Website design checklist

Not every website will need to do everything listed here, but every website designer should consider at least these points in developing a website that works!

Make it load fast

People are impatient. If something useful isn't on the screen within 10 seconds, you'll lose some of your viewers. The absolute maximum is 30 seconds. If you have a really long page, use some tricks that will allow the top part of the page to load instantly so that the visitor can have something to do while the rest of the page arrives.

Limit scrolling

In an ideal world, every page on a website would exactly fit on the screen and there would be no need for vertical or horizontal scrolling. Some designers recommend keeping pages to 500 words or less. Others (and I'm in this group) see the advantage of short pages but see nothing wrong with extremely long pages if conditions merit. Vertical scrolling is rarely a problem. Horizontal scrolling must (with certain specific exceptions) be avoided.

Use frames with caution, if at all

Frames create special problems for search engines, but these can be resolved. They used to create problems for some browsers, but anyone who is still using a browser that doesn't understand frames probably doesn't spend much time on the Internet. There is almost always a better solution than frames and Microsoft's proprietary "inline frames" should not be used unless you can guarantee that every person who attempts to view the site will use Microsoft Internet Explorer.

Don't pay for "top 10 listings"

Run away from companies that promise this. "Top 10" placement doesn't matter if you've chosen the wrong words. Choose the right words and you can create your own search engine success.

Use metatags

Metatags can help with some search engines. You should learn how the work and you should use them, but they are not magic. Some search engines ignore them. If you really want to learn about search engines, see www.searchenginewatch.com. Besides metatags, other top-of-the-page elements are critically

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Live from CorelWORLD


You'll probably be reading this issue of Dead Trees about the same time I'll be presenting this topic to the annual CorelWORLD conference.



Needless to say, I haven't been able to fit a 60-minute presentation onto 2 pages, so this topic will continue next month.

And speaking of Corel, you may know that I attended the Ventura Summit earlier this summer where I got a sneak peek at Ventura Publisher 10. It's been a long time since Ventura Publisher 8 was released and those of us who use the program regularly were concerned that there might never be another version.

Under the previous management, Corel was clueless about Ventura's capabilities. The new management considers Ventura, Draw, HTML, and XML (you're going to hear a lot about this in the next 5 years) to be central to the company's survival and prosperity.

Ventura Publisher 10 is on order and will be shipping soon. You should order your copy now, too! 

important. These include the page title (around 50 characters), a page description (keep it under 200 characters), and then the key words (no more than 500 characters).

Don't get cute with type

Most of the "good design" guidelines from print still apply on the Web. For example:

- Use ALL CAPS and *italics* sparingly. Avoid underlining entirely because underlines cut through letters' descenders and make the text hard to read.
- Allow plenty of vertical spacing.
- Left justification, ragged right is almost always easier to read
- Black text on a white background offers the most contrast. Black on yellow is good. Avoid combinations like red on green or green on blue.
- Check all text and graphics to ensure that they are readable even on a monochrome monitor.

Make the text stop; I want to get off!

Do not use scrolling text anywhere. Ever. Period. Scrolling text is an abomination. It's something that Java makes possible. Being able to do something is not a justification for actually doing it. Moving text on most computer screens is virtually impossible to read.

If you use a repeating animation, make it stop after several iterations. Reading on-screen text is hard enough without having to keep your eyes from wandering off to an animation.

Write clearly

"Plain English" written in active voice is preferable to jargon-laced text in passive voice. Before you release a website to the public, it's a good idea to have someone who knows nothing about what you're trying to accomplish read it. 