

RANDOM

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I may be crazy, but I'm not stupid.

THOUGHTS

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The great website makeover

No matter how much time you've spent developing a website, no matter how good it is when you're finished, there's always something you can do to make it better. This month we'll look at a couple of websites I've recently updated.

The first is the Power Direct Marketing site for Ray Jutkins, which began as about half a dozen pages six years ago. Since then we've added features, moved things, and expanded a bit. Instead of half a dozen pages, the site consists of nearly 1000.

Navigation had become cumbersome and graphics had been added with insufficient concern about consistency. The background "watermark" effect (trendy six years ago) just looked tired. The colors were outdated, too.



Ray and I talked about colors and eventually we came up with a dark red triad palette that seemed to work well.

I felt that Ray's mission statement was being lost by being so close to the

red and gray banner graphic on the old site, so I created an accent box directly opposite the menu that's the first thing visitors see. Because the site has so many parts, the menu on the left side is essential for helping people to find what they want.

Then I spread the banner across the entire page, allowed the words to run together, provided separation with color, and placed Ray's name in large type below the banner. "Ray Jutkins" is the brand name in this case, so the name should be prominently displayed.

The menu near the top of the page directs people to each of the 4 major sections of the website. Each of those 4 sections begins with a page such as you see at the right with links to



specific features of that section and to the "archive" for each of those sections. Most of the articles on the site are updated regularly and older articles go into the archive so that visitors may read more than just the current information.

Instead of using graphic buttons as on the previous version of the site, the new version simply uses bold red text to highlight each of the articles.

Your website is shouting at me!

Ray is a stickler for large type, so the display is somewhat larger and bolder than I would have used. On a low-resolution screen, the type size fairly screams. But we've never received a complaint from anyone who said the text was too small to read.


This website also uses a serif typeface, just as this newsletter does. I feel that sans faces are more legible on screen, mainly because screens are low-resolution output devices and serif faces depend on fine distinctions between thick lines and thin. This resolution is missing on most monitors, so the distinctions are lost. So are the serifs – the little "feet" on the letters.

While strongly favoring serif faces on paper, I prefer a sans face for anything I must read on screen. This decision is one that the client must make, though.

The old site could spread out to fill the screen, and that was fine when most screens were 800 pixels wide (or less). Those who viewed the old site with modern monitors that are 1200 or 1600 pixels wide found that the lines of type often became so long that they were difficult to read.

Text on the new version of the site remains the same width regardless of the size of the screen, so readability is better. On a wide screen, the visitor will see big margins on the right and the left but, unlike on paper, unused space on the screen is free.

Several options exist for dealing with the usable screen width and each is flawed because of the display technology used by computers. This isn't likely to change anytime soon, so websites will continue to exist in a display space that combines the worst of print capabilities with the worst of video.

Our goal is to find a way to make the site work within the limitations. 

Random Thoughts or Dead Trees?

Dead Trees seemed to be a somewhat negative name for this publication. Starting with this issue, the new name is *Random Thoughts*, suggesting – if not deep analytical articles – that at least minimal thought during development of the articles. Please note that I still bear no particular animosity toward trees.

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Website makeovers (the sequel)

Another website that's recently received a makeover is the one I maintain for Citizens for Humane Action, an animal rescue organization in central Ohio.

The original site, designed just a couple of years ago, was still reasonably current.

When I first took on the project, some of the elements were already in place so I kept those. As you can see there are some alignment problems (the small pictures almost line up with the right side of the red bar with the reversed white text. That bothered me.

I'd also set the site up using a frames-like approach to display the main site areas at the left of the screen. While handy, that technique takes a lot of screen space. Unlike the Power Direct Marketing site, this site has just a few areas – and the ones that are the most popular are those that show cats and dogs who are waiting to go home with someone. [Grammar note: Yes, we use the pronoun “who” when we talk about animals.]

Instead, I wanted to try a different technique that would use a pull-down menu. The problem with these menus is that sometimes they won't work properly for some versions of Netscape and they may not work properly on a Mac. I was able to find a menu system that works on all the major browsers, so that's what we used.




The navigation system now requires just a small strip at the top of the screen instead of approximately one sixth of the page width.

That leaves the space that was once taken up by the navigation system to be used for a “news section. The information in the shaded section at the left changes regularly.

And because the shelter recently moved from a rickety old former farmhouse to a new building about a mile away from the old location, it's important to highlight both the news address and directions for locating the new building.

We had begun to receive complaints about the “graduates” page on the old site because it had grown so large. Those who have pets from CHA are encouraged to send photos and descriptions for the page. People with older computers and slow connections were having trouble loading the page.

I split the graduates page into six pages. Now visitors must click a like to go from one page to the next, but the pages load even on slow machines.

It must be working. CHA's page receives 6,000 to 8,000 visitors each week and when people visit, they often give volunteers at the shelter the name of a specific cat or dog that they'd like to see based on the photo and description on the site! 



Technology and health care

The last time I was in the hospital for more than a few hours, I was having my tonsils removed. That was back in the days when anesthesia was spelled “ether” and the most advanced hospitals on the planet had an x-ray machine.

A lot has changed since then and many of the changes are technology-based. I “presented” (doc-speak) with a sore stomach, a high fever, and enough symptoms to be a puzzle. When faced with puzzles these days, the docs order tests.

The high fever indicated an infection. A blood test revealed an abnormally high “billiruben” count. That, combined with the results of a CAT scan and an ultrasound examination, pinpointed the problem: an infected gall bladder. Because the pain had subsided the instant I walked up to the triage desk in the emergency room, the assumption was that I'd already passed the gall stone. But were there more?


If so, immediate surgery to snag them would be called for. I got the impression this surgery would be somewhat akin to trying to grab a prize from one of those vending machines that always make the good prizes appear to be within easy reach when in fact they are impossible to retrieve.

Fortunately, MRI technology can show whether a stone is present without the surgery. Not many years ago, the patient who needed an MRI would have to travel to a large research hospital and possibly wait weeks for time on the machine. The hospital nearest my home has several and I found myself inside

one the following morning. The longest wait, because the test was on the weekend, was until sometime Sunday when an expert read the results and said there was no stone present.

That meant I could go home with nothing more than a couple of prescriptions for antibiotics, instructions for a low-fat diet, and an appointment to have the gall bladder removed.

Because there will be time for the infection to clear, the surgeon expects the surgery to be laparoscopic, meaning I'll have 3 small band-aids instead of lots of stitches and I'll spend less than 24 hours in the hospital. I've photographed this kind of surgery and I'm still amazed by the way it works: Tiny incisions, tiny instruments, tiny cameras, and large high-res TV screens let the surgeon operate inside the abdominal cavity without having to tear the patient open.

I'm pretty sure that I like this technology! 

CORNER on the market by A.J. Stinnett.

“Men may be divided into two groups,
Those with convictions and those opinions.
Men with opinions shout them out,
Men with convictions will die for their beliefs.”