How to Keep Website Visitors from Returning. Ever.

No single "right way" exists to design a website because every website is different and every website is designed to serve a different audience. But many ways exist to design a website badly. Consider these as ways to annoy visitors and ensure that they'll never come back.

This website is from Yale University. Even worse, it's from Yale's art school (http://art.yale.edu/). Each of the fireworks displays is animated. The site is too wide even for my wide-screen monitor. What is it that this site is attempting to communicate?

Nobody intentionally creates a bad website but it's easy to do. The first rule to keep in mind is never to do something just because you can do something. If you're running a humor site, people come to the site for humor; otherwise, they're not looking for funny business. Think you can lie about something (or *fib* or *obfuscate*)? Think again. Maybe you'll fool some people once but long-term relationships aren't built on prevarications.

Here's a short list of errors that are easy to make because they seemed like good ideas at the time. They're guaranteed not to make friends or impress your visitors.

Create a bloated site that takes 30 seconds to load. Various studies have suggested that website visitors will give your site 3 seconds or 8 seconds or 12 seconds (pick a number) to prove that it's worth viewing. If, after 15 seconds, your site is still loading, you're going to lose a lot of visitors.

Force visitors to endure a 60-second Flash presentation. If you must create a Flash entry page (please don't) at least give visitors the option to skip it.

Autoplay music or video and make it replay every time the visitor returns to the home page. Maybe this was cool 15 years ago but it's no longer cool. (Hint: It wasn't cool 15 years ago either.) If you have a reason to offer audio or video, let the visitor choose to play it. And if you must play audio or video the first time a visitor arrives, at least set a cookie so that you won't play it again when the same visitor lands on the home page a second time.

Make the interface confusing. A site I recently visited included a list of projects and beside each project a symbol was displayed: Black pentagons, green triangles, red octagons, silver diamonds, brown squares, blue circles, and yellow stars. I had no idea what they meant and I tried to read some meaning into the shapes. As it turned out, the shapes were meaningless but the color of the shape was significant. The symbols were not explained by a key anywhere on the page.

Create "mystery meat" navigation. That's a term coined by Vincent Flanders, author of *Web Pages that Suck*. He's referring specifically to unlabeled graphics that are used for navigation because the designer thought they were cool. People expect links to look like links. They expect navigation tools to have some explicit meaning. Don't be clever.

Where am I supposed to click?

Force me to register before I can see more than the home page. If the information you have is something that I really want to see, I might register but I probably won't give you my

real name or any other accurate information. I might even be rude. You may have a newsletter that I would enjoy but let me decide to request it after wandering around the site.

Show me a menu with 147 choices. More is not better. Focus! Create a menu that anyone can understand. Start with major choices (products, services, about, contact) and one level of options. If you need more than that, you need a different kind of navigation—one that allows visitors to search for what they're seeking.

Make the site cluttered. Headlines in blue. Yellow starbursts all over the page. Text in a dozen typefaces and sizes. A rainbow of colors. The goal is to communicate, not to overwhelm. If ever a case existed for the *less is more* school of thought, this is it. In the early days of desktop typesetting, this kind of design was referred to as ransom-note publishing.

Omit contact information. If your site sells something, tell me who you are and where you are. I want a physical address (street, city, state, and postal code). Give me your phone number and your e-mail address, too. If you won't tell me where you are, you won't get my business. And don't make this information hard to find. If you won't put it on every page, at least provide a link to it from every page.

Hide information about what I need to do if I want to return something. If your guarantees and return policies are obscure, I'm not going to buy from you. This is true of a lot of people. A 100% money-back guarantee is one of the strongest offers you can make. If you can, do; if you can't, at least tell me what your terms are.

Play games with security. If you tell me your site is secure, then I'd better see "https" in the address and my browser had better tell me that the connection is encrypted. If you display trust or security symbols (BBB and such) and the link is to a directory on your site, I'll leave immediately and then I'll contact the organization whose mark you're misusing and report you for fraudulent use of their trademarks.

When I make an error on your site's form, don't tell me what's wrong. And while you're at it, be sure to delete all of the information on the form so I'll have to enter it again because I don't have anything better to do. It's easy to mis-key something on a form. When that

In the site below, the bear head, the glass with the spring, and the stuff in the lower right corner are all links to something. But what?

happens and I have to spend a minute or more figuring out what's wrong, I may go to your competitor's site. If I make a mistake and you blank out all information on the form, I will go to a competitor's website.

Send me e-mail every day when I sign up for your newsletter. Unless you're running a newspaper, there is no reason for you to contact me every day. Do that and I'll unsubscribe before the end of the first week.

Ignore my unsubscribe request. If I don't want your e-mail any more, continuing to send it to me will not predispose me to use your product or service. When I tell you to stop, stop. If you don't, I'll block all messages from your domain and I may complain to your upstream service providers. Did you want that outcome?

Make it impossible for me to search your site to find what I'm looking for. People visit websites for a reason. In many cases, that reason is to find something (product, service, information). If you make it impossible to find what the visitor is seeking, the visitor will leave.

Pop up a live-chat window 10 seconds after I arrive at your site. No, I don't want to chat with your sales representative. I'm not yet sure what you offer or whether I want to do business with you. Show a live-chat link if you want, but skip the pop-ups unless you want me to leave. And if you do offer a live-chat option, make sure that someone is really available. When I click the live-chat link and I'm told that I need to send an e-mail, I'll go to your competitor's website.

Display a pop-up feedback survey the instant someone lands on your home page. I don't yet know who you are, what you do, or why I might want to deal with you. Why would I be interested in filling out a survey?

Make your website so wide that I have to scroll sideways to read it. Many people have wide screens these days but that doesn't mean that they run their browser in a wide-screen mode.

Ask me for far too much information. If I'm buying something, you'll want my billing and shipping information (name and full address for each). You'll want my payment information (credit card number, billing name, expiration date, and security number). And that's it. You probably don't need to know my sex (and please call it "sex" instead of "gender"). Unless I'm buying alcohol, cigarettes, or pornography, you don't need my age. You also don't need my marital status or the color of my favorite cat. Don't be nosey.

Make it impossible for me to change anything in the shopping cart. If I accidentally type "11" instead of "1", don't allow me to change the quantity without starting a new order. That will guarantee that I buy from someone else.

Add fees on the final page. I've checked the quantity and price of items, provided billing and shipping information, filled out the payment form with my credit card information. The next screen you display casually mentions that shipping for my $35 order is $70. You will not make a sale. You will not make a friend. You will earn a complaint to the Better Business Bureau and your state's consumer protection agency. Avoid this by being up-front with me.

Don't provide a way to retrieve my user name or password. My shopping cart has a $750 order but I can't log in because I've forgotten my password. Give me an easy way to solve the problem or I'll abandon the order.

It's important to consider your website from the visitor's perspective. In fact, doing so is the only way to ensure that you'll get it right. Ω