

Creating a Web Site That Works

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When most folks begin the process of creating a Web site, they generally become preoccupied with developing a handsome theme. But, placing too much preference on fashion over function could lead to a loss of business.

The look of your site is very important. In fact, major corporations spend millions of dollars researching colors and themes that convey their business ideals to site visitors. For instance, many news related sites use dark blue or navy as a primary color. That's because dark blue conveys a sense of being authoritative and official. A site advertising a day spa is likely to use pastels because they are soothing colors. So, when creating a site that works, choosing the colors and themes has less to do with your personal preferences and more to do with immediately conveying the overall gist of your business type to your potential clients.

The front page of your site is the single most important virtual real estate you own. Research shows that you have three to five seconds to capture your client's attention. If they don't respond well to the theme of your site or, if they don't immediately find what they're looking for, it's likely they will click away to another site.

There are a couple of things to keep in mind with creating a front page design that will actually work for you. A full page graphic or a Flash animation is splashy, but only for first-time visitors. If your site will include upcoming events and such, your Events page is likely to be the one that repeat visitors will bookmark, not your front page. If you are an author or a songwriter, you are in the entertainment business. Since your site will need to reflect that fact, you will have to find a good balance between fashion and function on your front page. Whatever design theme you choose, be sure to include an incentive for first-time visitors to click through to the more informative pages of your site and a way for repeat visitors to skip a Flash introduction they've already seen.

If you're a songwriter, you'll have a special issue to address with your front page. While you may want the world to hear your music, research shows that Web surfers overwhelmingly dislike having music automatically play when the site page initially loads. It's fine to have an audio player on your site as long as viewers have the choice of when they want to hear the music. Keep in mind that some folks surf at work and having music suddenly blare out of the speakers is unwelcome.

One of the most important features of a site that works well is easy-to-use navigation. The general rule of thumb is that you don't get too cute with how it looks and where it's placed. The overwhelming majority of sites on the Web place the main navigation either across the top of the page or down a left-side column. There's a reason for that. It's not because site designers have no imagination. It's because that's where viewers are trained to look for it. If your viewers have to search for links to find the other pages on your site, they are likely to give up quickly and find a site that doesn't make them work so hard or think so much.

A great way to get ideas for creating a site that works for you is to find other sites in your genre. Look at their pages from a functional point of view. Following are a few questions to keep in mind as you browse. How much content versus fashion do they have on the front page? Where is their navigation? Are they giving the viewer a reason to click through their site? What do the colors convey?

There's an old cliché that says imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. It's also a great way to design a site that works for your business. Find out what's working on the sites that sell and incorporate those ideas into your own site.