

WEB SITE DESIGN

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All of a sudden, there is a new expression in English: “home-page.” Someone coined this regrettable name probably right after they decided that all the URLs on the Web would start with “www,” thus giving us another strange sounding acronym. It is indeed so awkward to always say “double-u-double-u-double-u,” it has evolved to something like “dubyah-dubyah-dubyah” which sounds equally strange but a bit easier to blurt out. The excitement of the Web and the easy and affordable publishing possibilities have created a “home-page rush.”

A useful, purposeful, and well functioning site needs more, much more, than a home page. Hurrying to have a home page up is akin to rushing to write a one-page novel. Because of this unwarranted emphasis on home pages, Web site design does not get the necessary attention it deserves. This is the first of a series of editorial columns that will explore the fundamentals of good site design.

At the most abstract level, the purpose of a Web site is to share information. Unless the information shared is too little (read as insignificant) to fit in one home page, presentation of it requires a careful consideration of various factors. Until the advent of the Web, most information presentation was limited to the domains of books of various sorts, scholarly papers, articles, editorials, news, reports, and the like. In this kind of publishing, established style guides, publication manuals and corporate styles have made organizing information a template-driven process. This is not to imply that the authors of all these works did not know how to organize the information in their work. They simply had the luxury of an accumulated body of examples, experiences, and conventions.

Publishing on the Web is quite different from this paradigm, which breaks apart on the Web because of several reasons.

The Web has brought publishing within the reach of practically anyone. On the Web, review before publishing is not a requirement. There is plenty of evidence on the Web to support this. Instead of having hundreds of journals and magazines publishing various kinds of work, we now have millions of Web sites that publish whatever their owners wish. This certainly has been a liberating force in many ways. On the other hand, we wish some information had never been published. Nevertheless, the amount of accessible information has increased by some fantastic factors. Because of this proliferation, not only has finding information on the Web become a major challenge, but navigating in one Web site also often taxes our patience. Some sites contain so much information that would have been next to impossible to publish in any other format.

A second reason has to do with what gets published. In other words, we face a quality as well as a quantity of information issue on the Web. In the real world of paper-and-ink, editors decide whether something is worthy of being published. This editorial scrutiny and the presence of an editorial content give information the comforting context we are used to. Thus, it is easy to distinguish something we read in, say, *Time* and another we read in *The National Enquirer*. In contrast, on the Web anything can be published by anyone who wants to do it. With the advent of the Web, everyone has become a publisher. The range of type and quality of information on the Web covers the entire spectrum from sublime to ridiculous. The quantity of information also varies enormously from site to site and from subject to subject.

The third reason that the old paradigms break apart lies in the difficulty of designing a uniform information architecture for all kinds of information and for all audiences. The Web has given us a totally new publishing tool. Unfortunately, many use it simply as electronic-paper without thinking of its unique and sometimes difficult to master nature. Just as we do not drive a car as we ride a bicycle (let us hope,) we should not think of publishing on the Web without thinking of its attributes, strengths, and weaknesses.

Three major issues make a Web site an excellent, good, mediocre or a poor site. They are content, usability, and speed. Each area can be the subject of at least a lengthy manuscript and there are already many books dealing with these issues. These series of columns will explore them in enough detail with the hope to make the reader wish to learn more. So, these columns should be taken as what they are:

Appetizers.

Exercise:

Be a bit more observant the next few times you browse the Web. Every time something annoys you, note what it is and exchange them with friends. How much overlap do you expect? How much overlap do you observe? What does it tell you?

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