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Guide to Evaluating Website Usability and Aesthetics

More than meets the eye - or the screen

How do you define a well designed website? Most people would probably say that a well designed website is one that is aesthetically pleasing and user friendly. And they would be right – to a point. But the answer to this question is actually much more complex and less obvious than how pretty or flashy the website may be. It is always tempting to judge a site based solely on the look and feel, and the perceived usability. This document will help to structure your review of the portfolios' reference sites and to give you a peek under the covers into the more subtle, but critical implications of website design.

Understanding Aesthetics and Usability in Relation to Marketing

Many websites focus on aesthetics. So, let's start with the less obvious implications of 'look and feel'. Company websites can run the gamut from simple, flat sites to elaborate sites using Flash and animation. A website may be well designed for search engine ranking, or it may be simply a supplementary 'brochureware' site that is meant to direct sales efforts and provide pictures and information about a product or service. Perhaps the site is meant to act as a follow-through for an email marketing program. One site may be targeted at a rebellious young audience might use loud, distasteful colors to advertise a heavy metal band or to sell skateboards, while another site may be designed to appeal to an international audience, using esoteric art styles, fonts and graphics. When you review a portfolio of websites, it is tempting to make a judgment based on pure aesthetics. But, a thorough evaluation must include the market objectives and audience targeted by the website owner.

Usability is also sometimes difficult to judge. For example, menu clicks at the middle of the screen may look terrific and be useful, but they may also interfere with search engine readability and they may not work with many browsers. Sites designed to look great at 1024x768 monitor resolution are nearly useless to people working at 800x600 monitor resolution, forcing them to horizontally scroll and lose the overall view in the process. Some sites make liberal use of Flash and animation, stalling and crashing the computers of people on

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dial up. Other sites have great product images and descriptions but no links to add products to a shopping cart or check on shipping costs. And many sites do not provide links to take the user back to the Home Page or to the Contact Us section of the site if the user has wandered off to explore on other pages of the site.

As you review the designs of other websites, feel free to use this document as a 'guide' to help you assess the true usability and functionality of these sites. Since you may not compete in the same industry as the companies that own the sites you are reviewing, don't try to determine their effectiveness in their target market. Just look at the site from a usability perspective and try to imagine you are a prospective customer or someone who found this site and wants to know more about what the company does or sells.

List of Website Review Criteria

In some ways, a website is comparable to a complex work of art. When you view a painting in a museum you may easily fall into a dispute with other art lovers about the perceived aesthetics of a picture. But the skill of the painter can be judged more easily. One looks at the perspective of the painter, how he uses light and color, and the delicacy and effectiveness of his stroke. So it is with web designers—it is relatively easy to see if the designer really knows his craft.

Use the list of considerations below to review other websites and you will find that the list allows you to more objectively determine how effectively the designer has used available technology and design techniques to ensure usability and to make the site aesthetically pleasing. Try these techniques:

1. Launch the website and change your screen resolution to -- 800x600, then to 1024x768, then to 1280 x 1024. Notice the change in the view and how the website adapts to the various resolutions your customers may be using. A well designed site should either 'stretch' or 'center' the content to make effective use of the available window. In weak or poorly designed sites the user must use horizontal scrolling to see all the content but in so doing, they will lose the overall view.

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You may be interested to know that studies show that many people will not perform a horizontal scroll to read the full text, and therefore will miss critical information. Forcing the user to use the horizontal scroll to view all the information at their resolution is simply poor website design. A well designed site will stretch to accommodate all monitor resolutions.

2. Quickly click through several pages at different monitor resolutions, and see how it feels, what message is getting through at this high speed of clicking and scan-reading and what messages are being lost. Remember, this is how most people look at websites and make judgments and buying decisions.

3. Repeat Step #2, above at different modem speeds. In particular, focus on slower modem speeds and try using a dial up connection. Judge the effectiveness of the messages and the website at slower speeds. Remember that many people, in particular international clients, do not have high speed access.

4. Does the website create a positive impression using great looking, large photographs? That's nice. But, remember that at slow download and refresh speeds you may be frustrating the user. Great photos may be a credit to the photographer but less so to the web designer. Also check the special effects used on the website and see how these load at slower speeds. Users will often close a website rather than wait for large graphics or special effects to load.

5. See how the text on the site reads in a quick 'scan reading' mode, and then by carefully reading the content. Studies show that most people merely scan web pages, and serious shoppers will read carefully. A well designed site will deliver a concise, brief message for scanning and one that pulls in the reader so that they will want to read the complete message. These messages must be delivered simultaneously, in order to attract and retain the customer.

6. Check the readability and size of lettering on the site. Computer screens are often difficult for middle age and older people to read, as

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well as for those who are near sighted. The text on your site should be large and easy to read in a brightly lit room or a dimly lit office. Website text is therefore differently designed than newspaper, books, or even most advertising publications. A good website designer must accommodate this difference in media, by carefully choosing font types, sizes and colors.

7. Consider the site for Flash content, animation and vector graphics. If your site is using any of these techniques, you must recognize the following:
 - a. Flash sites are generally not readable by search engines. Since search engines are an automated advertising delivery mechanism for most sites, the search engine readability factor can significantly decrease advertising results.
 - b. When comparing the quality of site graphics, understand that while Flash may look better than a simple HTML site, the business impact may be poor. So it is important to note that the Flash designer is not necessarily a better website graphics designer.
8. What if the website looks really snazzy with extra 'bells and whistles' like animation and scrolling text. Recognize that these features usually stop search engine robots dead in their tracks and offer no advantage from a business perspective.
9. Check the URLs. If there are there a lot of '~ , = , +' characters, search engine rankings may be expensive to attain, because these characters can cause search engine confusion.
10. Does the site contain 'frames'? Many people feel that frames look good and make the site more structured and clearly divided, but frames are often unreadable by search engines.
11. Look at the lower 'crease' or 'fold' of the web page on the monitor. Is there critical information 'below the fold'? Studies show that most people prefer not to do vertical scrolling, though this is not

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as serious a problem as horizontal scrolling. Getting all the right information 'above the fold' is often difficult to achieve, as you have to consider the screen resolution of your target customer and market. You may target customers who use home computers, or customers in high-technology firms, or customers from various countries, all of whom will use different screen resolutions, and the 'fold' may appear in a different place for each of them. But you can make some assumptions.

Studies show that 800x600 is still the mostly commonly used resolution. However, a web page that is designed for full display at a resolution of 800 x 600 will display a lower white space on 1024 x 768+ monitor. Whereas, a design done for a 1024x768+ resolution displaying on 800 x 600 may require horizontal and vertical scrolling. It is a good idea to do a survey of your target customers and market in order to settle on the preferred screen resolution and then decide how to handle the display of information in customers using other screen resolutions.

12. Many company websites have a 'secondary page format'. That page format applies to all pages that are linked in the site and all pages that appear after the customer visits the Homepage. If your company uses a secondary format, look carefully at this as well. Is this secondary format stylistically consistent with the Homepage? The customer should always be aware that they are on the same site. You can use color schemes, format cues and logos to remind them of your identity and the site they are visiting so that they never confuse you with your competitor. Does the site have third level or fourth level formats? These can add more to a fresh appeal and can be designed to project the company image at every turn.

We hope this information has been helpful to you as you review the portfolio designs. Now that you have completed these website 'tours' you will find you can better analyze your own needs and choose an appropriate web design firm. WebAndNet is ready to work with your company to effectively plan, design and build high quality, high speed, attractive, HTML websites. Remember that HTML websites are the easiest type of site for a search engine to index, and will therefore give

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you consistently high search engine rankings in your competitive markets. But you do not have to sacrifice beauty for functionality. We believe our sites are among the most attractive HTML sites on the web today. And you'll want to check out the load and refresh speed of our sites as well. We know you will be impressed!

While aesthetic taste is somewhat personal, and it may be difficult to make a judgment about how each customer will perceive and view your site, the balance of all aspects of website design - aesthetics, usability and searchability - is critical to successful marketing on the web.

Please request a copy of our WebAndNet Web Marketing documents package. This package provides more information on the impact of search engine optimization on your website. As always, we would be happy to talk to you about your specific needs.

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