

# Good Web design pays dividends

**TECH ANALYSIS:** ANALYZE TRAFFIC, POLL VISITORS AND LOOK AT RIVALS' SITES TO AVOID GAFFES

By Jim Rapoza

**M**ORE AND MORE, A COMPANY'S WEB SITE IS ITS PRIMARY public face for customers, partners and clients. But eWEEK Labs' daily browsing experiences show that many businesses don't put enough work into the design and structure of their Web site.

Web users can probably rattle off a list of sites they find unfriendly and difficult to use and navigate—as well as a list of sites that are intuitive and easy to browse and that, not surprisingly, keep them coming back. All businesses, especially those that rely on Web visitors for profit, should do everything they can to make sure they are on that second list of user-friendly and well-designed sites.

However, for large businesses, achieving good Web site design is easier said than done. Corporations, especially those that derive revenue from the Web, face many challenges that can interfere with good Web design. These can include the need to incorporate and work with older Web-based content, which may be several site redesigns old; complications or restrictions caused by the Web CMS (content management system); and conflicting requirements from different departments in the company.

For sites that use Web ads, there's the added challenge of balancing the desires and demands of advertisers with the need to provide a friendly Web site for visitors.

None of these challenges

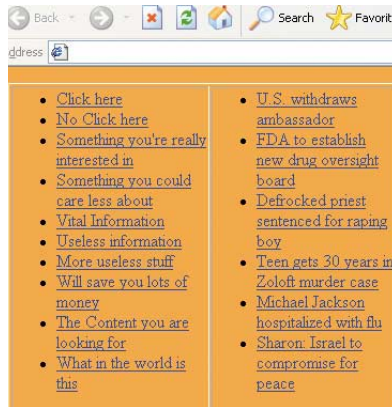
is insurmountable. With proper planning and management, site administrators can easily avoid the misplaced content, navigational dead ends and clutter that plague the worst Web sites.

## A wealth of information

UNLESS YOU ARE A BRAND-NEW company, you already have a Web site in place. While this can cause headaches and limitations in redesigning the site, it can also provide a wealth of information when it comes to planning and researching potential design and usability

changes for the site.

The two most useful elements will be the site's traffic logs and its regular visitor base. Many administrators never go beyond the basic traffic numbers in Web site analysis, but site designers



**If you have too many links, too close together, users can't find the links they need.**

who look deeper will find valuable insights into how visitors use the links and content on a company's site.

A good first step is to use traffic path analysis tools to look for dead ends and infrequently used click-paths. Also, many current Web analysis tools provide page analysis that enables administrators to look at a Web page and see the traffic numbers for every link on the page.

If a link isn't getting clicked, it could mean users aren't interested in the content, but it could also mean they can't find the link or that it's poorly placed in the site. Check through all historical logs to see if the linked content had more traffic in previous site designs.

In addition, if you're concerned about whether your current site design is working or if planned changes will work, go directly to the source

and poll your site visitors. Simple giveaways are often enough to get visitors to fill out a Web-based poll form. However, we advise caution when designing this poll: Make sure the poll isn't leading visitors to the answers you want, instead of to the ones you need.

A good technique is to leverage the disagreements you may already have in-house.

If different site developers or groups are regularly at odds over site design decisions, have them collaborate on the questionnaire. It may take a little longer to create, but it will most likely be more balanced.

For new companies, research can be more difficult because they have no historical data or current users. For these sites we recommend resisting the urge to launch with a big, splashy site and to instead start with a simple, flexible design.

Administrators should constantly analyze usage and talk to visitors during the first few months, regularly tweaking the site design to maximize both usability and visitor traffic.

Probably the most common sources of good research and design ideas (although many site designers will never admit it) are competing and similar Web sites. A good site designer can learn from the techniques and designs of

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**Can you read the content behind the ad? No one else can, either.**

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other Web sites without stealing their site design outright.

In the William Gibson book "All Tomorrow's Parties," a character remarks that the flashier a Web site is, the greater the chance that there's a dinky, nothing company behind it. Given the ease with which site developers can add multimedia, Flash and crawling ads, the temptation to go overboard is always there. But you wouldn't fill your company lobby with neon signs or televisions blaring commercials, and you wouldn't make it so cluttered that visitors couldn't find their way through it.

**The case for KISS**

WHEN IT COMES TO THE DESIGN and layout of a Web site, the ultimate purpose of the site for your business plays a key role. If your site is mainly informational and is essentially a repository for press releases and basic company data, we highly recommend basing site design on the KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) principle.

Stick with a standard left or top navigational bar and fairly sparse but clean content. This will make it easy for visitors to find information; keep it simple for almost anyone to add content to the site; and make it very adaptable to any future changes, either content- or structure-based.

The KISS philosophy is also a good way to go for sites that are selling products, be it software or physical wares. Every extra page, click, flashing ad or registration screen could be keeping a visitor from buying your products.

In these cases, you want to put as much information in the main product pages as possible. Every time you ask visitors to click deeper for extra information, you're increasing the chance that he or she will give up and go elsewhere.

The layout challenges are much greater for sites that generate revenue from Web-based ads. On these sites, page views and unique visitors rule, and there's a constant battle between the needs of advertisers and those of site visitors.

Typical mistakes on these sites include link overcrowding, where there are so many links on pages that a visitor can easily miss content they're interested in; overzealous page breaking, where visitors are constantly viewing little snippets of content that should all be on a single page; and, of course, over-the-top advertising.

The first two problems can be fixed easily with good planning and research and a healthy dose of common sense. If a big advertiser wants to run an ad that crawls across the Web page or uses annoying pop-ups, it can be hard to say no. But the ramifications of such decisions can be very negative and long-lasting for both the advertiser and the Web site. Recent studies have shown that when visitors are annoyed by an intrusive advertisement, they have negative views of both the site and the advertiser and often stop going to that site.

We recommend working

with advertisers to develop ads that are dynamic enough for their needs without intruding on the site real estate that visitors are viewing.

Today, there is almost no excuse for creating a site that is viewable only in Microsoft Corp.'s Internet Explorer. Nearly all Web authoring tools are now heavily based on Web standards, making it much easier to build pages using CSS (Cascading Style Sheets), XHTML (Extensible HTML) and other key Web standards that will be viewable in all Web browsers.

On the server side, most CMSes and portals are based on common technologies such as Java, PHP and .Net, making it easy to build custom templates and site layouts and to move between servers and systems.

In the end, common sense is the most effective tool in good site design. Trust your instincts and the comments of your associates and users. Unlike your physical offices, nothing is set in concrete. Don't be afraid to admit when mistakes are made and to quickly fix those mistakes. ☺

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**Designing for accessibility**

A core segment of visitors simply wants Web site content to be accessible to them. The World Wide Web's Web Accessibility Initiative ([www.w3.org/WAI](http://www.w3.org/WAI)) has created standards and guidelines for creating accessible sites. The forthcoming Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 sets forth several guidelines for creating accessible Web content:\*

- ▶ **Provide** alternatives for all nontext content
- ▶ **Ensure** that information, functionality and structure are separable from presentation
- ▶ **Make it easy** to distinguish foreground information from background images or sounds
- ▶ **Make all functionality operable** via a keyboard interface
- ▶ **Organize** content consistently from page to page

\*For the full guidelines list, go to [www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20](http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20)

Source: eWEEK Labs reporting

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