

# SEXY WEB DESIGN

BY ELLIOT JAY STOCKS



CREATE YOUR OWN STUNNING WEB INTERFACES THAT JUST *WORK*

# Foreword

---

I like sexy things.

Now, hold on a moment—you can lower that eyebrow. I’m talking about objects that are beautiful and exciting—and that are quite removed from *sex*. I like it when I have a head-turning, jaw-dropping, breathtaking reaction from an item—whether it’s a 1957 Corvette Stingray, a MacBook Air, or the elegant flourish of a beautiful typeface’s ampersand. I’m talking about objects that are so well designed and downright stunning in both functionality and aesthetics that I stop and think, “Whoa—that’s *sexy!*”

I’d like to just make one point clear. “Sexy” may be a four-letter word. But it’s a *good* four-letter word. An item that’s sexy is exciting. Appealing. Intriguing. Slick. It’s an Eames lounge chair. It’s that smokey bar jazz song. It’s the upscale sushi lounge with soft, dim candle lights accompanied by the raspy, dramatic crooning of Portishead. Whatever it is that you find to be sexy, pay attention to it. Why do you find it sexy? Is it simply how it looks or is crafted? Is it how it works, too? Chances are, if you think an object is sexy, it’s more than a pleasure to look at: it’s a joy to use as well.

“Whether you’re designing a book, a software application, a piece of hardware, or a web site ... think sexy.”—Kathy Sierra

So, what about sexy web design? That is, after all, the title of this book. Well, the way I see it, sexy web design is all about the details—every intricate, delicate particular. When I see a web site that pairs great typography with a solid, well-designed grid, and makes use of stunning imagery and ornamentation, I just have to check it out. And as a designer for the Web, this is precisely the kind of reaction I want for my own work. That’s where Mr. Stocks comes into play. Elliot is a consistent maker of objects that are sexy, when it comes to the Web.

In April of 2008, I was flown out to London for an unique opportunity: it was a live, onstage Photoshop battle for the Future of Web Design conference put together by Carsonified. The girl’s team, consisting of Hannah Donovan (Creative Director at Last.fm) and myself, was against the boy’s team of Jon Hicks (Hicksdesign) and none other than Elliot Jay Stocks. While I was certain that Hannah would totally rock this competition, I was a little nervous at the thought of being in a Photoshop battle against Elliot. Thankfully, my nerves were calmed a bit thanks to the Belgian beer that Elliot provided for the four of us during the contest.

But Elliot’s great taste extends beyond beer. Look at his online portfolio; you’ll see quite a range there—everything from gorgeous band and musician web sites to web industry-related conference sites; he’s even produced print design work, iconography, and illustrations. Though his portfolio is diverse, throughout his body of work you’ll find some common themes; elegant typography, interesting textures, and earthy, organic imagery are the ingredients that make up his recognizable



# Chapter 1

## Interfaces are Sexy

---

I'm going to be honest. The reason I'm a designer is a simple one:

*I like making stuff look pretty.*

There, I said it. You know my secret. I've laid myself bare and that's a fair way to start a book.

But web design goes beyond making things look pretty. It's also about making them *work*. Rather than just concocting passive visuals, web designers create interfaces, systems that allow a person to interact with an object or system to achieve a goal. The best web designs give clear visual signals on how to go about the task.

Web sites—by their very nature—are all interfaces, even though some look more like plain, practical tools; think of the clean form design from 37signals' online tools, shown in Figure 1.1. Others—like the more complex Future of Web Apps Miami 2008 site,<sup>1</sup> shown in Figure 1.2—are more decorative.

---

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, this site is no longer online.



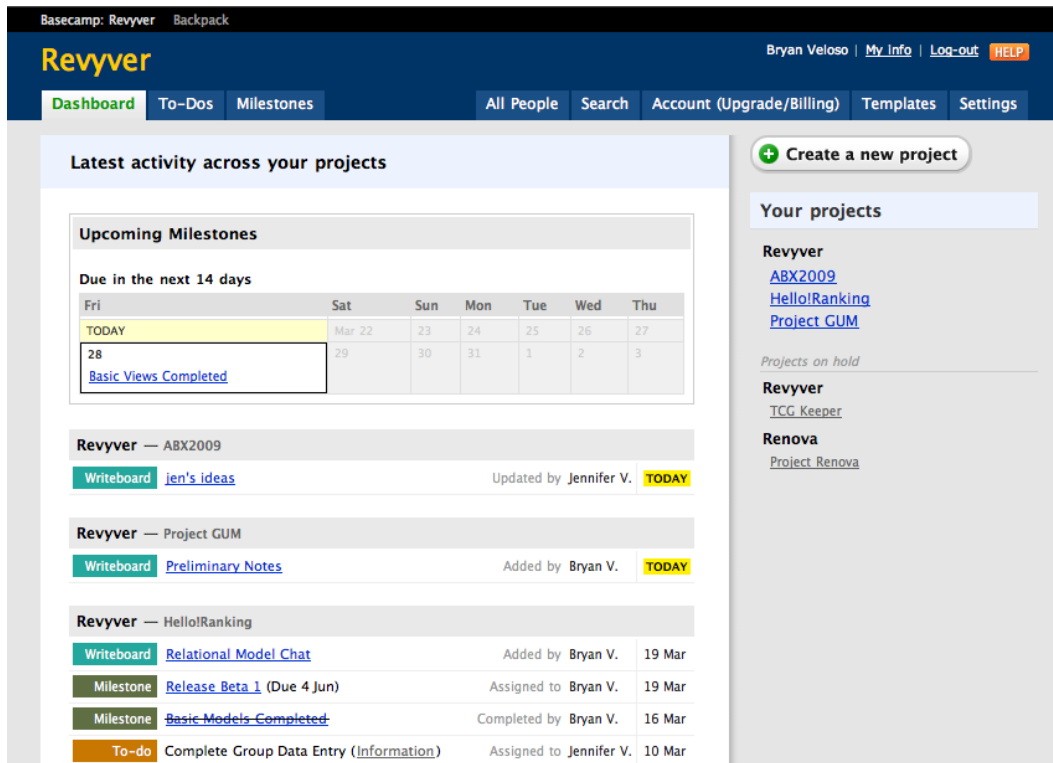
Figure 1.1. The clean, simple interface of 37signals' Basecamp<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1.2. The 2008 Future of Web Apps Miami

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.basecampHQ.com/>

So what are we hoping to achieve when we design a web site? Well, my aim is to create an interface that people find genuinely enjoyable to use. And although a web site—by its interactive nature—has to be *used*, I’m also interested in how it’s *viewed*. After all, we’re web designers, so we need to concentrate on the look. Functionality will form a significant part of the book—but the main focus will be on creating interfaces that look great while engaging the user.

## Interfaces

Interfaces are all around us, and once you know how to spot one, you’ll start to see them everywhere.

Think of you—the user—and an object that you need to control, or a goal that you want to achieve. In between the object and ourselves we have the interface: a simple method of achieving our goal. Although it’s not true to say that an interface is always simple, it’s true that an interface’s role is to simplify a task.



### Users are People Too!

By the way, while we’re sitting here comfortably, right at the beginning of the book, let me add a brief note on the term *user*. It’s one that fails to particularly appeal to me, given how it seems so tech-centric. Keep in mind that a user is simply a human being, an average Joe, a passerby on the street who might be a web-savvy tech-support guru, or an elderly lady who’s only just started using a computer. People *use* web sites, so it’s a handy term, but just try to keep in mind that we’re talking about regular humans, rather than some kind of machine-operating robot.

## Interfaces in the Real World

Before we leap on to the Web, let’s think about interfaces around us in the real world. This will help to coax us into the habit of analyzing the processes of interaction. We’ll start with a simple example: a plug. (Oh, and I wholeheartedly confess that I started with a plug because it was the first thing I saw when I looked up from my screen.) Figure 1.3 shows us an everyday UK wall plug.

It can be helpful to break an interaction apart into its components: the user (this can be an object), the interface itself, feedback, and the goal.

User	Interface	Goal	Feedback
Laptop plug	On and off switch on the wall	Socket connected to mains power	On indicator

I click the switch down, electricity surges through the cable to my laptop, and I’m able to carry on writing for another hour. Lucky me!

But the role of the interface goes beyond simplifying the task in hand—it should also give us information about whether the task has or hasn’t been completed: feedback. In the UK, our wall sockets

usually have a little red indicator which appears when the power is turned on; you can see this in Figure 1.3. Therefore, I know I've achieved my *goal* (if it's not too big a term to call it that) because of the feedback provided by the indicator on the top of the depressed switch.



Figure 1.3. The ON indicator shows me it's on.

Let's take another example: a digital camera, like the one shown in Figure 1.4. When we're about to take a photo, there's a bit more going on here in terms of interface. In fact, I'd say that my camera's interface is built up of three mini interfaces:

- the function buttons on the hardware, which allow me to change the settings
- the LCD screen, which provides me with information on the camera's settings
- the shutter button, which is clickable, and provides me with audible feedback when I press it

Yet this more complex, layered interface still fits neatly into our system:

User	Interface	Goal	Feedback
Me	Function buttons + LCD screen + shutter	A photo	Sounds + visual indicators; the photo is displayed



Figure 1.4. Your standard digital camera (Photo: Canon)

## Interfaces on the Web

Now that we know how to break down an interaction into its parts, let’s look at some interactions on the Web.

Imagine a form, like the one shown in Figure 1.5. You want the user to fill in your form, but you don’t want them to submit it without filling in the required fields. What’s more, you want to show and hide certain fields depending on what they input (for example, if someone answers that they have a car, you might want to show a drop-down menu that lists car manufacturers). The form interface provides us with feedback in the guise of a message or indicator.

User	Interface	Goal	Feedback
Me	Required form fields + Optional form fields + Submit button	Form submission	Submission message

The screenshot shows the Wufoo form builder interface. On the left is a sidebar with tabs for 'Add a Field', 'Field Settings', and 'Form Settings'. The 'Field Settings' tab is active, showing options for a 'Test' field: Field Type (Single Line Text), Field Size (Medium), Options (Required, No Duplicates), Show Field to (Everyone, Admin Only), Range (Min, Max, Format), and Predefined Value. At the bottom of the sidebar are buttons for 'Duplicate', 'Delete', and 'Add Field'. The main area shows a preview of the 'Untitled Form' with the text 'This is my form. Please fill it out. It's awesome!'. The form contains three fields: 'Test' (a single line text field), 'Select a Choice' (a dropdown menu with 'First Choice' selected), and 'Comment' (a large text area). At the bottom of the form preview are buttons for 'Add Another Field' and 'Save Form'.

Figure 1.5. A form in action

It's not all about bare-bones functionality, though. Remember: this book is about *sexy* web design, so we'll be looking at ways to build interfaces that are stunning as well as useful.

## Web Design Goals

Let's face it, the Web is often a fairly barren landscape: just think of its dull, text-based roots. In many respects, progress has been limited in the short time that's passed since the Web's conception. Web technologies have evolved and improved, but they've hardly been radical changes; the core elements of HTML are still at the heart of what we do, and as such there are myriad constraints in which we have to work. Even if you forget design centered on web standards and consider Flash, factors such as the limited viewport, or screen size, variable connection speeds, and restricted hardware capabilities suggest there's major scope for improvement.

Like all goals, successful and engaging web design is as much about overcoming technical challenges as it is about creating an attractive product. But technicalities shouldn't hinder you from achieving your goal: to create a site that's a joy to behold.

## What Your Site Does

Web site designs are often presented as static images in the design stage, but by their very nature undergo a transformation by the time the project is completed. So when we're designing with static images, we need to stay mindful of *how* that image will eventually work within a web site.



This sobering thought also reminds us that we should hold off from firing up Photoshop for a moment and invest some time into the logic behind our web site. I'm not talking about logic in a technical, code-heavy sense; just that we should consider the processes involved in using a web site. At its basic level, that means questions like: "What is the major call to action for this site? What do we want the user to *do*?" At the other end of the spectrum, we have factors such as where to place elements or which photo to use.

## How Your Site Looks

Let's establish one standard rule here:

*The more attractive an item looks, the longer people will want to look at it.*

Yes, that's right: design an appealing-looking website and users are more likely to receive your client's message, buy their product, engage in their community, or do what you want them to do. What's more, they'll return, like I often do to the beautiful Fall For Tennessee<sup>3</sup> site shown in Figure 1.6. Now, there's a reason to care about great design (and probably more valid than my "I like to make stuff look pretty" mantra).



Figure 1.6. The absolutely beautiful Fall For Tennessee web site

<sup>3</sup> <http://fall.tnvacation.com/>

## Usability and Accessibility

With the Internet allowing our work to reach a global audience, we have to try and cater for a massive range of people: blind users, elderly users, underage users, users with slow Internet connections or older, unreliable machines, users with little knowledge of the way web sites work, technology enthusiasts who expect nothing short of cutting edge ... the whole spectrum.

While part of a web site's accessibility depends on the markup, quite a lot of it is governed by the design. Throughout the book, we'll be taking both accessibility and usability into consideration throughout the design phase. If you keep your users in mind at all times, then the road to usability nirvana will be an easy one.

## Design Process

Like the creation of any successful artifact, a web site needs to *evolve*. It involves planning and preparation, and takes shape over a period of time. The more planning and forward-thinking we can do as designers, the better. Preparation helps us sort a project into nice, neat, orderly piles—defining specific goals along the way—and assists in foreseeing any potential problems that could set us back. In general, it's safe to say that planning out the site's creation process in detail makes everyone's lives easier. Happy designers. Happy developers. Happy clients. All of them happy people, if not slightly shiny.

## Research

Research is a stage that's often misunderstood and often overlooked. When a project's budget is tight, the research phase is almost certainly one of the victims, usually because it's less tangible than the stages that make up the finished product. But it does still make up the final product! Without research, we're flying blind: we're jumping straight into the creative process without fully understanding the context in which we're creating.

If you're feeling a little daunted by this research concept, relax. It's a stage that only needs to use up a small amount of time, and a lot of the preliminary client and designer discussions that happen all fall under the umbrella of research.

The most common form research takes is asking the client to name web sites that he or she likes and dislikes. Questioning the client further, asking why they like or dislike those web sites—or elements of those sites—is even more helpful. In fact, in many instances, I've even found this to be as informative as a design brief! If the client can then explain how those preferences relate to their own brand values that they're trying to portray—or the functionality they want their own customers to experience—then you have a design brief right there.

In truth, research is a bit of a vague term, but this is a good state of affairs: the kind of research you do depends on the type of project you're working on. I'm going to suggest a few different methods

of research that you can apply to your projects, but they're all interchangeable. Keep it loose, keep your mind open, and prepare for the project in any way that feels natural and helpful to you, your colleagues, and your client.

## Structure

With our research complete, and a collection of sources of guidance and inspiration, it's time to start planning. But where do we start?

Stay away from that computer! Seriously—go and sit away from a computer (there are such places), get some paper and a pen, and start scribbling.

The structure of a site should come freely, with as little restraint as possible. In the beginning, keep it loose, and approach the task without being encumbered by exact technical concerns. They're worth considering, it's true, but the decisions at this stage should be based on what the site can become—rather than worrying about how specific form elements should be displayed. Figure 1.7 shows you one of my very rough, early diagrams.

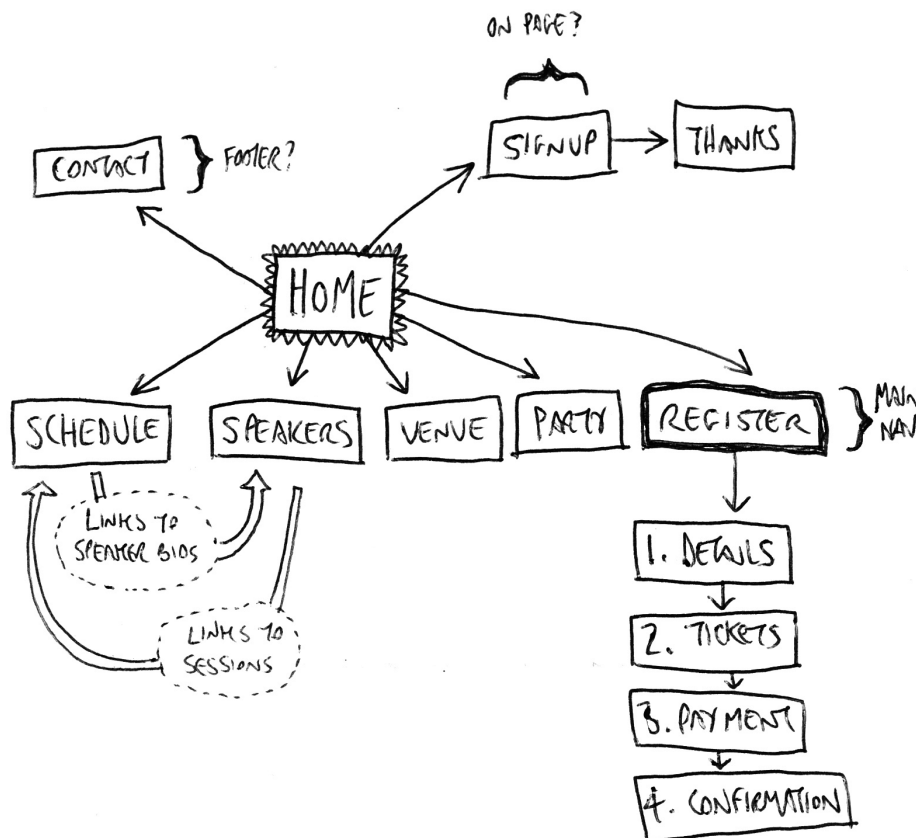


Figure 1.7. Very rough!



## Information Architecture

As the plan for the site gradually evolves, you can begin focusing on certain areas. What should be the key message that hits the user when the site loads? What is the primary call to action? How many pages should there be? What should be on each page? What elements should be on all pages? How does each element relate to the goals of the web site? Each of these questions relate to information architecture; in terms of the Web, this is the science of organizing information in a useful and logical manner.

There are debates about how much of this we should do as designers, and indeed, Information Architecture is often a job in itself. However, as so many projects require us designers to pick up some of the reins of an information architect, it's important that we get a grounding in the practice.

## Wireframing

In my wild, heady days of web design youthfulness, I regularly made the mistake of starting a site design by jumping straight into Photoshop. In my defense, this was a case of the circumstances at hand: the company I was working for at the time often sprang projects on us that had almost no time frame. The brief arrived in the morning and they needed the site live by the evening ... of the previous day. But whereas some of these turned out to be relatively successful web sites, I would recommend that you first draw up decent wireframes—blueprints for your design—on paper before heading straight into creating full-blown designs. Sure, you can use Photoshop to create your wireframes, like the one in Figure 1.8—in fact, you can use any tool you wish—but I'd recommend starting off with good ol' fashioned pen and paper.

In the Wireframing section of Chapter 2, I'll take you through a variety of techniques, starting with pen and paper, and finishing with some neat, computer-generated diagrams, ready to form the basis of your actual designs.

We'll be using Photoshop to create these, but if you'd rather use another application like Fireworks or OmniGraffle, that's fine—choose whichever production process best suits your workflow!

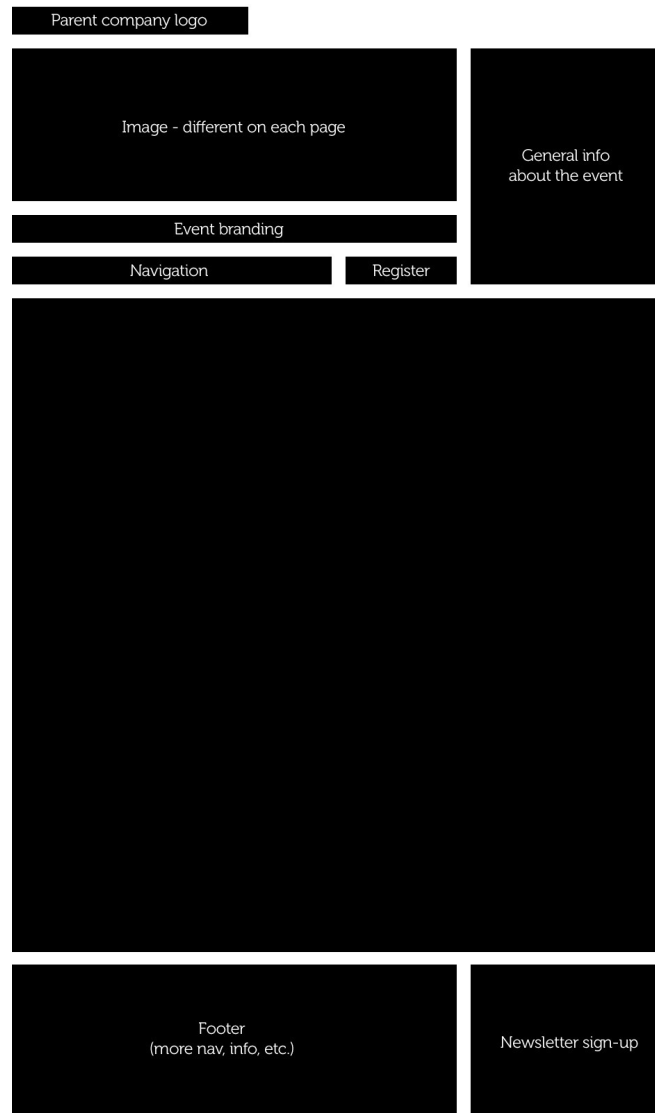


Figure 1.8. Wireframes start to take shape

## Tone, Mood, and Atmosphere

Rounded corners and gradients might look great on some sites, but terrible on others. Your messy, grungy background image might sit well on a site for a heavy metal band, compared to, say, a dental practice. So we'll be exploring the various moods and atmospheres we can create using changes in visual style. We'll look at what approaches to take, when to use them, and when to use alternatives.

On any web site, the goal of the visual style is to evoke a feeling in the end user—a feeling that ties in with the concepts and values of the company (or individual) the site is trying to promote. And because we're dealing with imagery rather than words, our job is to convey that atmosphere in an



around your web site. You can see a variety of navigation styles being used on Erratic Wisdom<sup>5</sup> in Figure 1.10.

Figure 1.10. A variety of navigation styles on the Erratic Wisdom web site

## Forms

Forms can be extremely tedious to style, but taking the time to apply some polish so they look right—like Mint,<sup>6</sup> shown in Figure 1.11— can really make the difference between a slapdash job and a great design. It's more than about changing the colors to match your site's palette; aspects such as aligning input fields' widths and positions to the grid can allow the user to scan through the form elements and find out how best to fill in the information. Taking inspiration from some of the best examples on the Web, we'll design forms that use inline messages to give extra information to the user, guiding them through the form completion process. We'll look at everything from the humble search form, to the newsletter sign-up, right through to the registration process on a more complex web application.

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://erraticwisdom.com/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.haveamint.com/>





Figure 1.12. The minimal but informative interface on the Vimeo player

## Desktop Behavior

In the grand scheme of things, computers have only been around for a minimal time. But the Web's been around for an even shorter period, so most of our web interface basics have been inherited from the desktop applications to which we've become accustomed. As web applications become more complex, we're finding online experiences that closely resemble desktop behavior: dragging and dropping, image viewing and manipulation, and—in the case of web sites at the cutting-edge—experiences that don't even feel like they're happening inside a browser. The interface of the 280 Slides<sup>10</sup> web site, shown in Figure 1.13, looks and feels just like the desktop application as Microsoft PowerPoint.

---

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.280slides.com/>

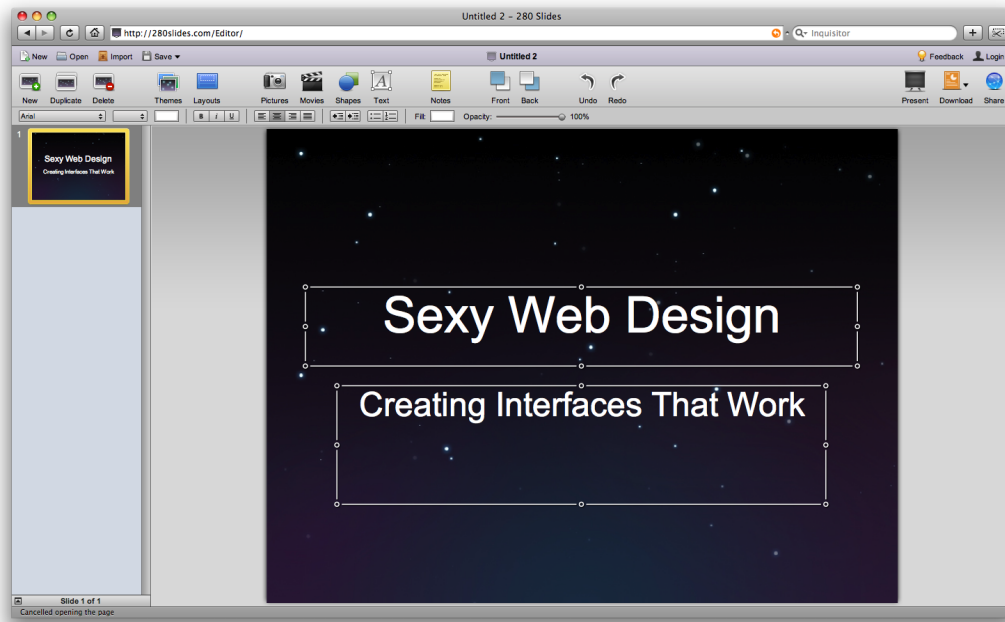


Figure 1.13. A desktop-like experience in the browser from 280 Slides

## Aesthetics

Let's face it: this is the fun part. You've planned your project, prepared your research, sorted out your wireframes and information architecture ... now it's time to crack open the tins of paint and start throwing colors at the canvas, Jackson Pollock style!<sup>11</sup>

Not only is this phase the most satisfying to every designer's *inner artist*, but we really can relax a little and have some fun; we've planned everything up to this point so that we have a clear idea of the framework on which we can work our design magic. I must admit that I've sometimes been a little too eager to jump into fully-fledged Photoshop mockups without doing the groundwork. But it's definitely worth the wait!

## Layout and Composition

People talk about web design as a young medium, and while in many senses that's true, they're disregarding the immense history of design practices that the new mode inherits; hence, the key principles of web design are exactly the same as those of print. Traditional graphic design concepts such as layout, typography, and color theory remain just as relevant on the Web; all that's changed is the constraints under which we work. In Figure 1.14, we can see how the Volunteer Lawn site<sup>12</sup> packs in plenty of information without becoming overwhelming or cluttered.

<sup>11</sup> Jackson Pollock is an artist known for his technique of splattering color in big, bold strokes. Thankfully, Photoshop is less prone to causing a mess on your studio floor.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.vollawn.com/>



Figure 1.14. Volunteer Lawn's site layout has lots to see without getting lost amidst clutter

One key difference between design for print and design for the Web is the nature of the medium. A printed brochure has fixed dimensions, and every copy looks exactly alike. For the Web, the dimensions and layouts can vary—for example, the size of the browser window or the capabilities of the device they're using—and the possible combinations are different for every user. Are they viewing the site on a 30-inch Apple Cinema Display or a mobile phone? What fonts do they have on their system? Are they running the latest version of the Flash Player? Can the user even see the web site, or are they relying on a screen reader to convey the site's content?

The truth is we're unable to control exactly how our web site is experienced, and this point is reinforced to me every time I embark on a new project. But rather than treat this as an obstacle, we should embrace this flexibility as the chance to use the medium to its full advantage. After all, my grandmother is unable to increase the font size on her local paper, but she can enlarge it on her newspaper's web site. Working on the Web is our chance to serve up content flexibly, in a way best suited to our users.



## A Change of Scenery

Designing for all kinds of different displays and capabilities can be quite a challenge. If you need some respite, I heartily recommend that you do some print design every now and then. Compared with designing for the Web, the predictability of a paper object is a very welcome break—plus you'll get the chance to learn some of the skills specific to designing for print!



## The Artistic Layer

Here's another unfortunate truth: a lot of people see what web designers do as utterly pointless. Why bother creating a seamlessly repeating, background-image texture when you could have a flat color? Why add a subtle shadow beneath your content boxes when a simple 1-pixel border will do? Well, because we know how much difference it can make! That's one of my main passions when it comes to design: adding that extra touch of TLC to a project can really improve a site's look, regardless of how subtle it is. Attention to detail goes a long way towards creating a visually rewarding experience for people; it can be the distinction between good and great design. Figure 1.15 illustrates small embellishments on the Decor8 site<sup>13</sup>, such as the fabric patterns, stitched motif, and the neat display of a range of information. It really is that subtle!

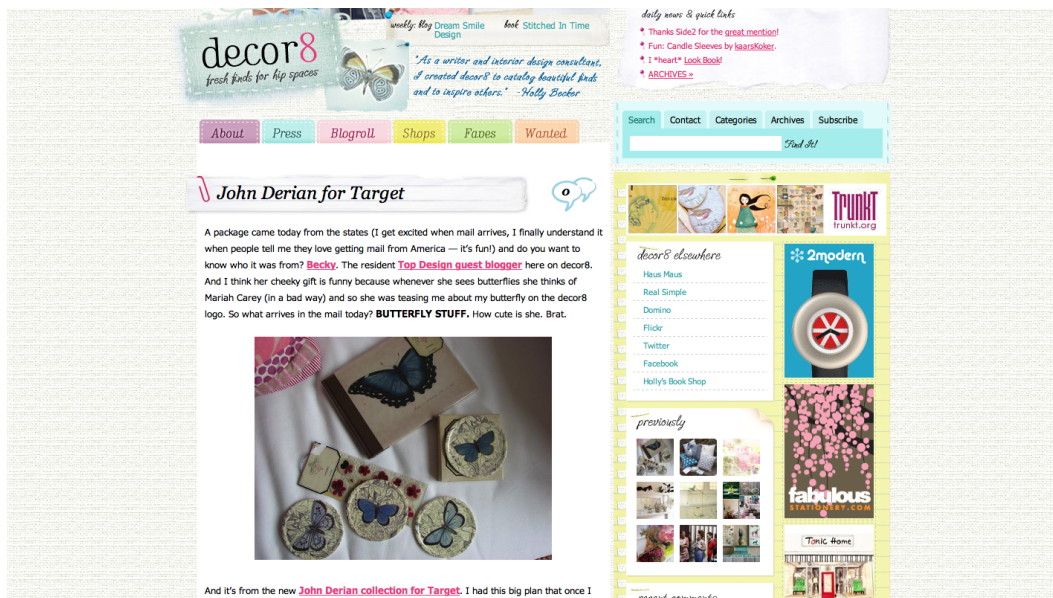


Figure 1.15. Lots of visually pleasing enhancements on the Decor8 site

We're going to explore how we can apply these little touches to our web sites. How does your choice of color reflect the message you're trying to convey? How can we evoke the right atmosphere with our design? Let's consider how Art principles—yes, with a capital A—influence design. We're going to give designs soul, personality, and character!

Most importantly, you're going to see how it's possible for these artistic ideals to sit alongside web-centric concepts like functionality and usability. At times it's inevitable that the two must compete, but we'll be striving for the common ground. We'll be looking at how contrast can improve legibility, how color and pattern can form consistency, and how mood and tone can be set through careful attention to the details.

<sup>13</sup> <http://decor8blog.com/>

## Typography

In recent times, typography on the Web has developed a bit of a cult following, having been largely ignored by designers in the Web's formative years. Sites such as I Love Typography<sup>14</sup> are at the forefront of this reinvigorated interest in the art form, and designers like Jason Santa Maria, whose site you can see in Figure 1.16, are leading the pack with experiments in type.

Relatively new techniques—such as image replacement, Flash text replacement, and CSS3's improved support for including typefaces in your style sheets—are slowly opening up more methods for displaying type on the Web. We'll be exploring some of the tricks we can use in our design to create fantastic effects, as well as what we can achieve with the most common, *web-safe* fonts for great-looking type. Here we'll examine traditional typographic techniques that are easy to implement, yet can help spice up some ordinary text. But rest assured, our focus extends beyond usability; there's room for experimentation here, and I intend to use it. Because believe it or not, the concepts of sexy type and accessible text aren't necessarily mutually exclusive!

And why stop there? Let's look at the exciting artifacts that have been produced by print designers and see how far we can take those on the Web.

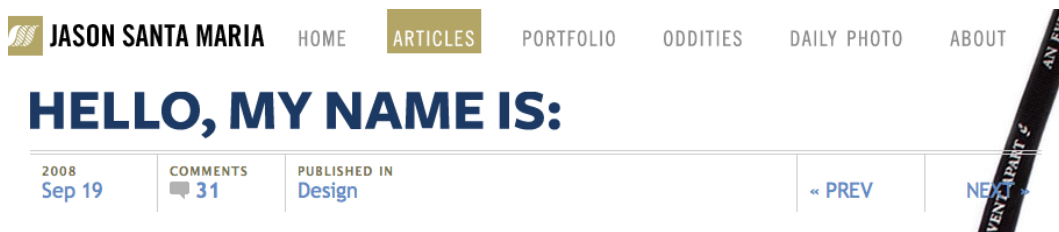


Figure 1.16. Jason Santa Maria's<sup>15</sup> continually changing use of bold typography

## Images

It's possible to achieve great design on the Web without the use of any imagery: well-structured grids, mindful use of color, and typographic treatments can be enough to create a beautiful look without an image in sight. However, imagery does play a key role in conveying a sense of atmosphere.

An image can take many forms: a photograph of a person for an *About* page, or an illustrative diagram to explain a concept on a blog post—these kind of images add visual *value* to content. But then there's the presentational, or decorative aspect: for instance, an image might simply be a box shadow or a rounded corner—the kind of thing that enhances the visual styling of the page. Since this is a book about design, presentational images will be our main focus.

<sup>14</sup> <http://ilovetypography.com/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://jasonsantamaria.com/>

Another example of imagery used frequently in web design is, of course, iconography. In a way, iconography is a combination of content and presentation: it adds meaning to content while dressing it up in a visually pleasing manner.

Given that so much of a web site's visual style can be controlled by imagery, and because images can be broken down into so many subgroups that perform different functions, we'll be spending a significant amount of time in this area of web design.

## Convention versus Innovation

You know what really winds me up? Boring web sites. No, hang on—that's wrong. What really winds me up are web designers who settle for the mundane, rather than attempt an uncommon path. It really is easy to design a great-looking web site that incorporates a few bold, original elements to set it apart from the crowd. I'm going to show you how having a little bit of courage to be different—despite how small—can really go a long way.

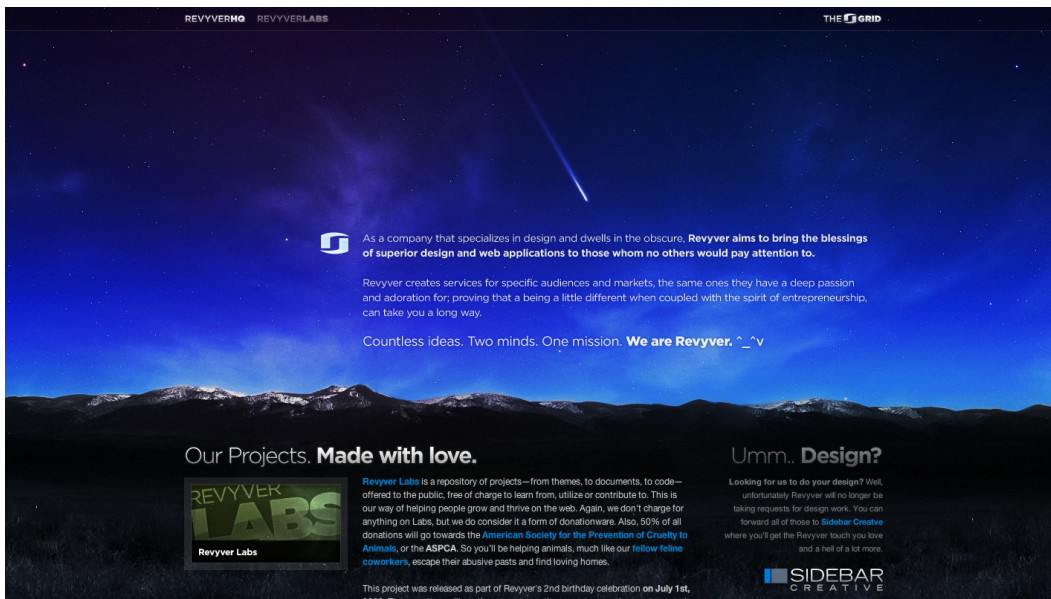


Figure 1.17. Some bold use of whitespace on the Revvyver site<sup>16</sup>

It's more than just about breaking the mold, though; after all, conventions are there for a reason. While innovation helps to push things forward and move trends along, convention provides a framework of proven concepts that work; that is; systems that people recognize. A simple example is how we almost always place our navigation in a strip near the top of the page, or to the left or right of the content. These are conventions that work, and in this instance they work because it ensures the navigation appears in the area of the screen that the user will see first.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.revyver.com/>

Drop-down form elements are a traditional way of displaying price ranges (such as \$10–\$20, \$21–\$50, and so on), but the Kayak site, pictured in Figure 1.18, opted for draggable sliders to filter their search results instead. A slider is still a convention (more from the desktop than the Web), but using it in this sense gives the site visitor a visual way of customizing their results. It’s an interesting example of how a convention—used in a new way—can actually become an innovation.

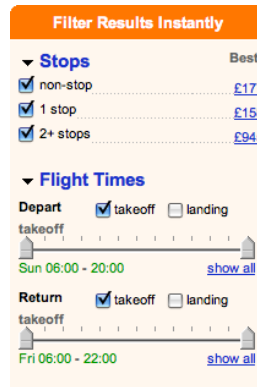


Figure 1.18. Instead of using drop-down menus for price filtering, Kayak uses draggable sliders<sup>17</sup>

## Deliverables

So you’ve designed the best-looking web site in the world and you’re shopping for the suit or gown you’ll be wearing to the celebrity-packed design awards ceremony that you just *know* you’ll be invited to. But hang on a minute—your site needs to be built first!

The good news is that, although web site building is beyond the scope of this title, there are already several wonderful books on the subject (with many published by SitePoint, of course!) that will guide you on your way to development enlightenment. So, you’re covered, whether your tastes favor front-end code like HTML, CSS, or JavaScript, or server-side heavy stuff like PHP, Rails, or—yikes—.NET. Brave you.

But you and I aren’t getting off that lightly, and if I’m going down, I’m taking you with me. So, last but by no means least, we’re going to look at deliverables—that is, how to split your lovely Photoshop output into individual image files, ready for a developer to build. It’s not all slicing and dicing, though. Imagery needs to be prepared with its final context in mind, so that a great design concept can still look sensational when recreated on an actual web page.

On a personal note, I’m usually responsible for the front-end code (such as HTML, JavaScript, and CSS) as well as the design itself, so I always have the production stage in mind right from when the design begins. This is an advantage I believe every web designer should possess, regardless of whether they’re responsible for code. For this reason, you’ll notice that every example in this book

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.kayak.co.uk/>

is created with that consideration in mind. The appearance and usability of the end result should remain paramount in the designer's head: substance should never be sacrificed for style.

## Design Comps

When you finish designing a web site and prepare for its development phase—whether it's to be handled by you or another developer—what exactly is it you hand over? Your final design comp—short for comprehensive artwork—is your completed design, ready for a developer to build. I'll be looking at the best way to present your static designs using a simple guide to best practices. But before we even get to the finished stage, we'll be exploring ways of showcasing your ideas to the client as the design progresses. In essence, we'll be getting down and dirty with how to handle all these files flying back and forth.



Figure 1.19. Part of our finalized design comp

## Style Guides

It's not just files, though. Often it's useful—and sometimes essential—that we hand over style guides along with the finished design. Style guides are also associated with brand, identity, and logo design, and are used to ensure that the brand is carried across all of the paraphernalia produced by a business, but they're equally important in web design. Mostly, this is because you might be handing over the design to a third party who'll actually be building the site—but on web sites where there are thousands of pages generated dynamically, style guides are like page templates: indications of how certain sections of the design can be applied to a page, regardless of the variable content.

When it comes to interaction, style guides can also help describe a non-visual process. For instance, “when we click an *X* type of button, an *X* type of box should always appear before the page reloads.”



And be assured: style guides are useful for you *as well as* other people. You may find you have to return to a job several months after completion, only to find that you've forgotten how things should look and work!

## Let's Start Working

---

So as you can see, we're going to be covering the entire design process in this book: from initial ideas through to when we finally hand it over. Along the way we're going to look at best practices, knowing the rules and when to break them, and how to create absolutely beautiful web sites.

Follow me, if you will, on the road to—drumroll, please—sexy web design!

# Chapter 2

## Research

---

Before we decide *how* we're going to create our design, we need to decide *what* it is we're going to create. Well, that's easy—the client just gives us a design brief, and then we get to work—right?

Well, you could do that, but you'd be missing out on the all-important research stage. Fortunately, we've got a whole chapter devoted to just that.

## The Brief

---

A design brief details what the client expects of the design you'll build. A brief is an understanding between client and designer, rather than a formal document denoting a contract between two parties. And the better you understand each other, the more likely the outcome will make both parties proud. Most importantly, the more detailed the brief (even if it takes the form of several email, phone, or face-to-face conversations back and forth), the more chance you have of fulfilling its requirements. In other words, *brief* is a totally inappropriate term!

Imagine you receive a note like this:

Dear web designer,

I'd like a web site, please. I want it to look really cool and stylish! It should be really fun and easy to use.

A brief as basic as this is unhelpful. What does it tell us? Absolutely nothing! Every client wants a web site that looks cool and stylish, and is fun and easy to use. I'm still waiting for the day when

a client asks me for a site that looks utterly terrible and fails to work. Now that'd be an interesting brief!

## Guiding a Brief

To receive a detailed brief from our client, we should help them out a little. Remember, some people can do with a bit of help in putting a brief together.

Kick things off by asking questions. Giving your client a set of focused, direct questions should result in quality answers. Vague, open-ended questions begets nebulous answers—that is, nothing useful!

## Some Basic Questions

The questions you ask will really depend on the kind of site you're building, but there are some basic questions that are useful for any project:

What do you want someone to do once they've visited your site—that is, what is the call to action?

How should a user feel when they visit your site, and what should be their lasting experience?

Name three sites that appeal to you and explain what it is you like about them.

Name three sites you don't like and explain why you dislike them.

What is your budget and ideal time frame?

These questions are important, because you'll instantly find out some practical guides for the design you'll create, such as:

the business goal behind the site

the intended emotional effect

what you could possibly emulate

what you should definitely avoid being influenced by

how much time you can spend

Many companies or individuals won't understand the concepts you take for granted as a tech-savvy web geek. Try to guide them through the process using everyday language, and only introduce a technical term when you can explain what it means and why they should take interest in it.



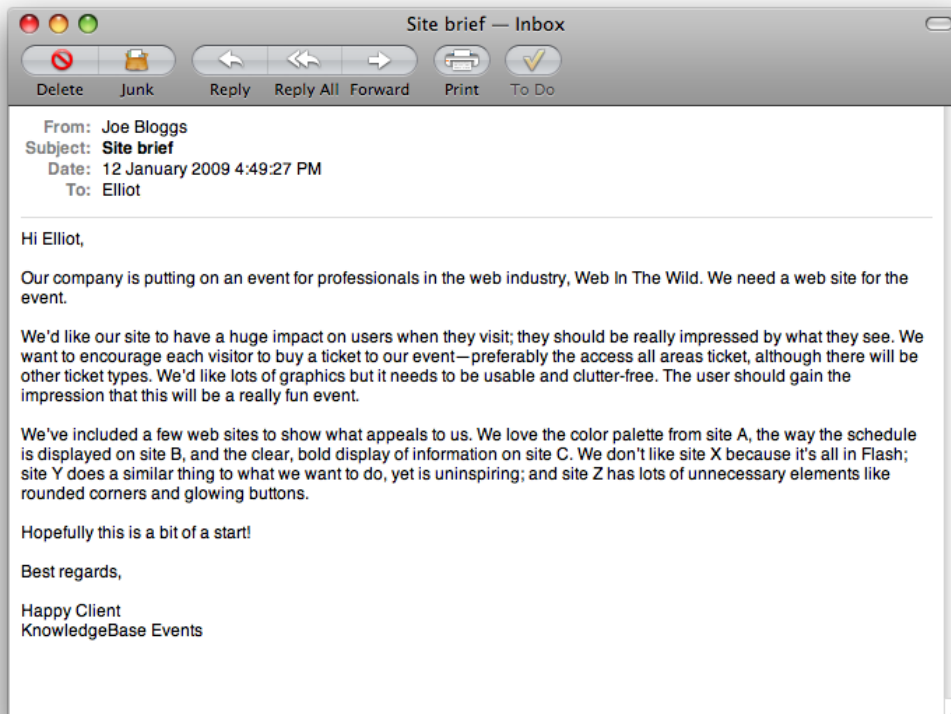


## Working with an Established Framework

You might find that your client already has a strong idea about what they expect from the design, especially if they're a larger company. They may have specific guidelines or requirements based on organizational policy, or they may have already sought recommendations from other web professionals, such as information architects or usability consultants. Larger projects might involve more in-depth research into the target audience; this could take the form of user-testing on existing web sites with the creation of user personas—character sketches of typical visitors to your site—as a guide to your site's future audience. In this book we're concentrating mostly on smaller projects, so these kinds of situations are beyond the scope of our example project—but if you find yourself in this situation, naturally it will form part of the brief, and you'll need to take these requirements into account.

## Expanding the Brief

Imagine our client sends an email containing the following brief, based on the five questions we asked them:



As briefs go, that's a fairly informative one—there's plenty of detail—yet it also gives us lots of scope to be inventive. Let's have a look at what we can take from it.

## What Has the Brief Told Us?

main goal: buy *access all areas* ticket

look: visually rich, clear and uncluttered, an atypical style with a big impact

feel: fun; the *access all areas* ticket title alludes to a VIP pass at a gig

technology: not keen on Flash

## What Do We Still Need to Find Out?

We know that the primary goal of this site is to encourage the visitors to buy tickets, but can the client also define any additional goals?

Are they entirely against the use of Flash, or are they happy to use it where the site would most benefit?

Apart from ticket sales, what's the main information the site should convey about the event?

In terms of visual style, what are they looking for? Are they after a design aesthetic in particular?

How soon is *as soon as possible*? (This is irrelevant to us in our fictional situation, but it certainly would matter in the real world!)

As hypothetical as this is, you can still see that some answers have the tendency to create more questions. This is good, though: it's all part of the process, and more questions help you to refine the brief.

## The Finalized Brief

After some more discussion with the client regarding these questions, we can add more detail to our brief.

It's worth noting that our client has given us some technical information, such as the use of Flash and fixed widths, but it's unlikely that most clients will be that web-savvy. Remember, hold your client's hand when required. It's probably unnecessary for you to explain every last decision to them, but try to answer any questions they might have. For instance, if they're adamant that *all* text should be resizable, be sure to explain to them that image-based text is unable to be resized as cleanly as normal text.

## Project Desirables

The main objective is to encourage the user to buy an *access all areas* ticket.

The secondary objective is for the user to buy another ticket type.

A general objective is to generate interest in the event.

Information should be immediately obvious and clearly displayed.

A balance should be struck between a *fun* atmosphere and a sense of authority and expertise, provided by the big-name speakers.

## Technical Requirements

The design can be of a fixed width.

Top-level navigation will remain the same across each page, but there will be various sub-menus that change depending on where you are.

JavaScript may be employed for an enhanced user experience.

Flash can be used in moderation, but only for small parts of the site. All key elements (such as the navigation and main content) should be rendered in HTML.

Images may only be used for h1 and h2 headings; h3 and lower will be text.

Advertising will be used on the site (sparingly) in the form of sponsor logos, so space should be reserved for it.

## First Steps

Let's begin with the first logical step. We're going to be creating a web site for an event, so we need to analyze the brand values associated with the event: these in turn will be the core concepts that the site needs to convey. Let's imagine we ask our client for some brand values, and they give us the following ideas to work with:

fun and exciting: more than just a conference

credibility: advice from the absolute experts

inventive and innovative: a group of creative people open to new ideas

Already that might start conjuring up some stylistic ideas in our minds, but let's leave that for the moment. We should be asking ourselves: what makes up an event site? Our client has yet to specify the actual pages they want, so we'll help them out by brainstorming:

Home: an introduction to the event; leads people into other parts of the site

Bookings: to sell the ticket types

Schedule: for details about the event

Speakers: an easy glance at the experts involved

Venue: where the event is located and the facilities available

Sponsors: may appear in the sidebar or footer, rather than a page of its own

Community: parties, links to social networks, photos, and so on

Let's take a look some of the values we want to convey with our site, and take a peek at how other event web sites go about it.

## The Element of Fun

Events—or, more specifically, the kind we like to have in the web community—tend to emphasize the convivial aspect. Who would've thought that people like to hang out with their friends and colleagues for a social drink?

With the fun element being such an important selling point, it makes sense for us to give this a lot of prominence on our web site. Although it's important to stress the knowledge that can be gained at such events, we all know that we're *just as* interested in the parties! That's why we'll suggest to our client that a whole page should be dedicated to social gatherings happening around the event, with the imagery of the site portraying a fun, party-like atmosphere.

## Gravitas and Authority

But we mustn't get carried away with all this *fun* malarkey. We need to make it clear that this is a credible, serious event, too. Otherwise, how else are delegates going to convince their bosses to pay for this out of their training budget? The web site for Web Directions North, shown in Figure 2.1, is neat, clean, and means business.

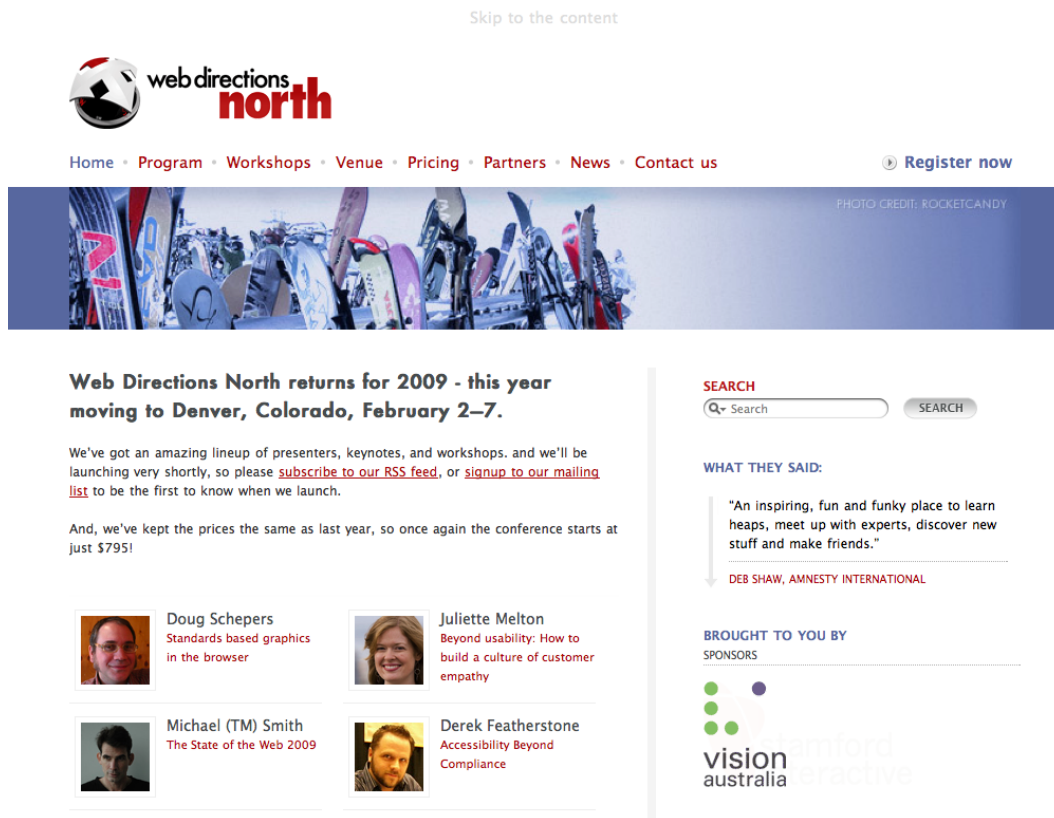


Figure 2.1. The straightforward design of Web Directions North<sup>1</sup>

Going to an event is meant to be an educational experience, especially when a workshop is involved. The Sidebar Workshops site we see in Figure 2.2 does this well by explicitly stating *What You'll Learn* right near the top of the page, and again right underneath the registration information. As

<sup>1</sup> <http://north09.webdirections.org/>

well as the prominent position, the text is short and easily digestible: a nice, memorable chunk to take away.



Figure 2.2. We know exactly what we'll gain from Sidebar Workshops<sup>2</sup>

## Inventive and Innovative

Our client also wants us to ensure that the design suggests a feeling of invention and innovation. One way to present this idea with the most impact will be to create a design that breaks the rules slightly, whether that's in terms of color, layout, or type. As we look around for inspiration for our design, we'll be sure to keep our eyes out for examples that exemplify this goal. The real opportunity for trying something new will come later, however, when it's time to plan the aesthetics of the design—we'll get to that in Chapter 5.

## Achieving a Balance: Information and Atmosphere

Balancing the display of information while conveying the right atmosphere is a huge challenge.

When I designed the Future of Web Applications (FOWA) Miami 2008 site,<sup>3</sup> I attempted to get the best of both worlds by giving the site a fun kind of feel with the beach in the background, but keeping the information neatly organized in the foreground. You can see this on the schedule page in Figure 2.3, with the clear separation of time slots and information. We decided that it would be more helpful if I designed some icons to visually indicate each type of session; that way, users could clearly see if it was a presentation, a lunch break, or a party, and so on. This allowed for the opportunity to throw a bit more of the playful feeling into the mix, so I threw in some *little dudes*.

<sup>2</sup> <http://sidebarworkshops.com/2008/washingtondc/>

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this site is offline now.











14:05 — 14:45		<b>Panel Discussion, chaired by <a href="#">Erick Schonfeld</a>, TechCrunch, including <a href="#">Kevin Rose</a>, Digg</b> Launch a Web App in 40 Minutes
14:45 — 14:50		<b><a href="#">Sean Siebel</a>, Microsoft (Diamond Sponsor)</b>
14:50 — 15:30		<b><a href="#">Matt Marshall</a>, VentureBeat</b> What Makes The Next Great Startup?
15:30 — 16:10		<b><a href="#">Emily Boyd</a>, Remember The Milk</b> From the web, to the iPhone and beyond!
<hr/>		
16:10 — 16:40		<b><a href="#">PM Break</a></b>
<hr/>		
16:40 — 17:20		<b><a href="#">Kevin Marks</a>, Google</b> The Future of APIs
17:20 — 18:00		<b><a href="#">Cal Henderson</a>, Flickr</b> The Application of New Features to an Established Application
18:00 — 18:40		<b><a href="#">Gary Vaynerchuk</a>, Winelibrary.tv</b> How to Grow a Community in The Future
19:00 — 20:00		<b>Live filming of Winelibrary.tv</b> Join Gary Vaynerchuk for a special filming of winelibrary.tv
21:00 — 01:00		<b>Official FOWA Party, sponsored by Scrapblog</b> @ Nikki Beach, South Beach, Miami



Figure 2.3. Adding fun to a schedule with some playful icons on the FOWA Miami 2008 site

The Sidebar guys kept the schedule looking fairly businesslike on their Workshops site, seen in Figure 2.4, but it still looks terrific, and is a great example of attention to detail.

TIME	DESCRIPTION	SPEAKER
8:00am – 9:00am	<b>Registration &amp; Breakfast</b> Get to the hotel bright and early to pick up your namebadge and grab a snack before the first session.	
9:00am – 9:15am	<b>Welcome &amp; Introduction</b>	
9:15am – 10:30am	<b>Planning &amp; Designing Your Interface</b> You have a concept and a feature list, now what? Bryan helps you organize and label your content, and teaches you to find zen in the most subtle details.	<b>Bryan Veloso</b>
10:30am – 10:45am	<b>Mid-Morning Break</b> A quick pause between sessions—just enough time to grab some coffee and check your email.	
10:45am – 12:00pm	<b>Slicing &amp; Dicing: Exporting &amp; Optimizing Images</b> Now that you have your design, Dan teaches you to translate your carefully crafted layers into creatively flattened rectangles, and how to pick the best image type and compression to achieve the right balance of good looks and slim file sizes.	<b>Dan Rubin</b>
12:00pm – 1:15pm	<b>Lunch</b> Lunch will be catered in. This is a time to refuel, and get to know the other attendees and the speakers.	

Figure 2.4. More great design on the Sidebar Workshops site

## What Matters the Most?

If you think about what might be the most important information relating to an event, you might say date, location, and price—but in all likelihood there are other elements that entice potential attendees.

Most events' web sites recognize celebrity appeal and make their big-name speakers as obvious as possible, like dConstruct,<sup>4</sup> shown in Figure 2.5. The reverse is also true: if the event lacks many web personalities, they'll play down the speaker list. Sometimes, as we see in Figure 2.6, the speaker list is so unwieldy that they choose to exclude it from the homepage altogether, and instead focus on more general information.

<sup>4</sup> <http://2008.dconstruct.org/>

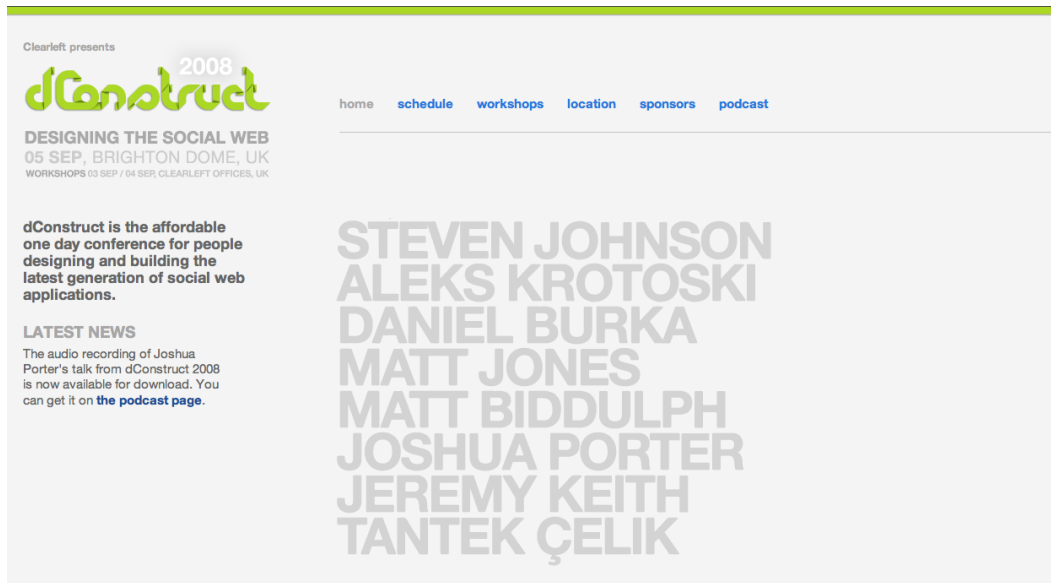


Figure 2.5. Speakers are the priority on the 2008 dConstruct site's homepage ...

Figure 2.6. ... but the multitude of speakers at South by Southwest Interactive<sup>5</sup> means the homepage should house more general information

<sup>5</sup> <http://sxsw.com/>



Venues and locations can sometimes be a drawcard for delegates. And when the location is also a popular holiday destination like Miami, then you should really shout about it.



Figure 2.7. The FOWA Miami 2009 site is unapologetic for its bold declaration of the location

## Brand Consistency

Brand consistency is the goal of keeping a consistent look, feel, and message across all of a company's communications, including its web site. Depending on the project, you could find yourself in one of a number of potential situations. Let's take a look.

### From Scratch

If the brand for the event is yet to exist, then our site will be providing the beginnings of a defined experience and acting as a style guide for other events to follow. Be mindful that limits may still apply, though: this might be the first event, but it should probably tie in with already established concepts by the company. That might translate to a simple action like incorporating the parent company's logo into the footer, or it may be more complex: there could be a particular set of style guidelines that we have to follow, such as a color scheme or font.

### Redesign

If previous site designs exist, then you should maintain consistency, but each event could have its own *voice*, or theme. You can use previous versions of the site as a guide to design elements you could reuse. Perhaps you could use a different color palette, yet still maintain a similar design template.

## Tie-ins

You may need to create a design that closely ties in with a previously established identity. The An Event Apart web site<sup>6</sup> seen in Figure 2.8 has its own branding, but incorporates the exact same look and feel of its sister site, A List Apart.<sup>7</sup> Rather than taking only small elements of the design patterns as you might find when a child site is borne of a parent company, the two are treated as equals: two sides to the same coin.

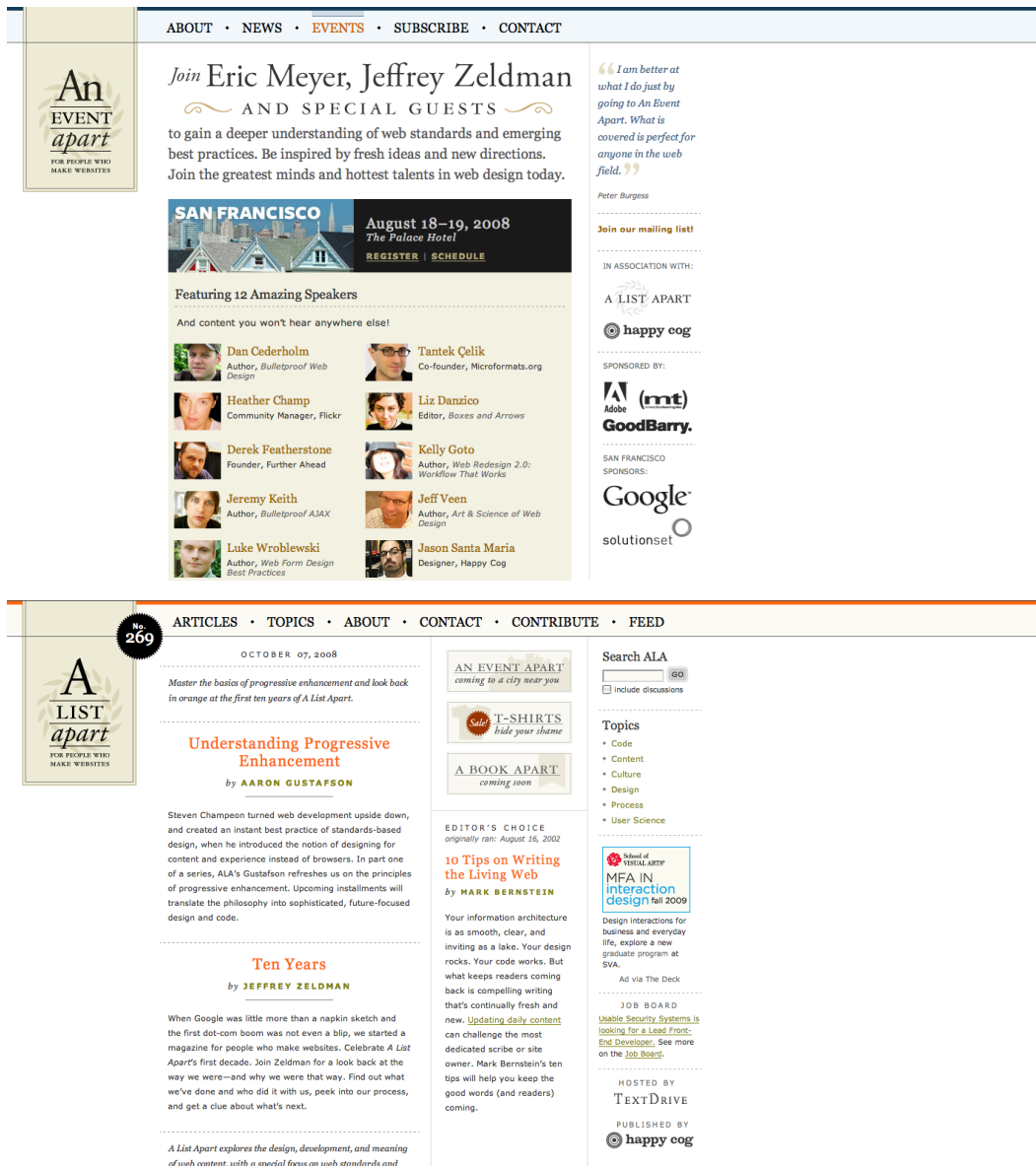


Figure 2.8. The literal tie-in of the web sites for An Event Apart and A List Apart

<sup>6</sup> <http://aneventapart.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://alistapart.com/>

For our project, we'll need to incorporate the company logo of the organization running the event—but we'll have free rein when it comes to the actual event branding, since it'll be the first of its kind (that is, the first scenario—From Scratch—above). This will demonstrate how you can be creative while still operating within a few guidelines. Guidelines are good, by the way: they take away some of the scare factor of a completely blank canvas!

## Inspiration Resources

So far we've been looking to other events' web sites for inspiration, but we don't have to stick to that niche. It's become quite popular to collect examples of first-rate design and archive them as sets on Flickr,<sup>8</sup> an image-sharing service. To start off, check out Patrick Haney's massive collection,<sup>9</sup> and the Web Design Inspiration Flickr pool<sup>10</sup> which he administers. For even more Flickr sources, check out Vandelay Design's list of 99 Flickr groups for design inspiration.<sup>11</sup> And numerous web sites exist, such as Smashing Magazine<sup>12</sup> and UI Pattern Factory,<sup>13</sup> that are excellent sources of interesting design examples.

## Atmosphere Inspiration

Let's get an idea of the kind of atmosphere we'd like our site to have—the feeling we evoke through color, subject matter, and texture. You may be familiar with the concept of a mood board, which describes a general collection of images, textures—almost anything that conveys the same *mood* you want to achieve. Let's take the term *wooden*: a traditional mood board might entail, for example, cutting out images of wooden furniture from catalogs or photographs of trees from magazines, and then laying them down on a canvas to make a montage.

Oh, and by the way, it's unnecessary to use an actual board—any surface (physical or virtual) will do! There is even a variety of software tools available to help you create your own mood boards if you want to do so digitally. Figure 2.9 shows a mood board created in Photoshop from public domain and Creative Commons-licensed images found on the Web.

---

<sup>8</sup> <http://flickr.com/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://flickr.com/photos/splat/collections/72157600060481506/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.flickr.com/groups/webdesign-inspiration/>

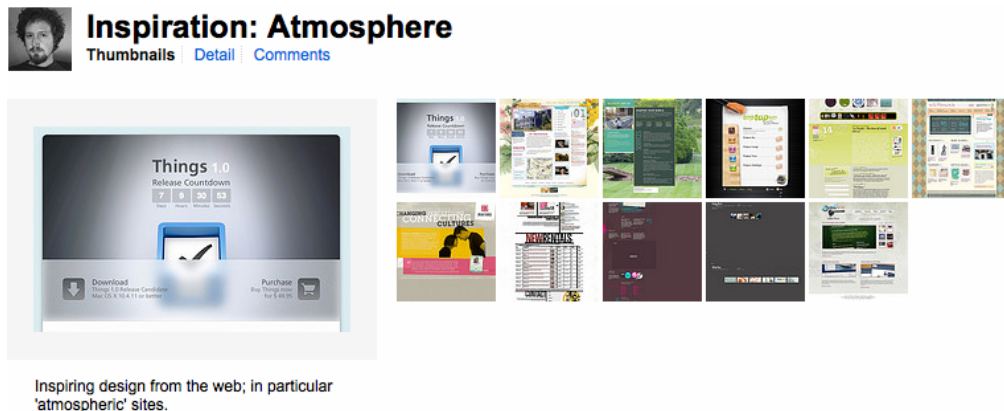
<sup>11</sup> <http://vandelaydesign.com/blog/design/flickr-groups-for-designers/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://smashingmag.com/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://uipatternfactory.com/>

Figure 2.9. A mood board<sup>14</sup>

Collating a photo set on Flickr is akin to the action of creating a mood board, particularly when researching atmosphere. I've collected some, which you'll see in Figure 2.10.

Figure 2.10. My atmosphere set on Flickr<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> This mood board incorporates images from the public domain and by Flickr members moriza, pshutterbug, extranoise, christophererin, caroslines and Ray\_chel. They've been licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution license.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.flickr.com/photos/elliottjaystocks/sets/72157612161024243/>



## Composition Inspiration

We aim to create a unique and interesting web site, setting it apart from the kind of site you see every day. A noteworthy way to stand apart from the other sites is to think of an unusual composition or layout. We'll need to take a few risks in the interests of originality, so I've been collecting design examples which follow the same mantra. Of course, we'll still be mindful of the site's usability—it's important to stick with what users will understand—but you'll see that even a little *thinking outside the box* can go a long way. Here's my composition set on Flickr, in Figure 2.11.

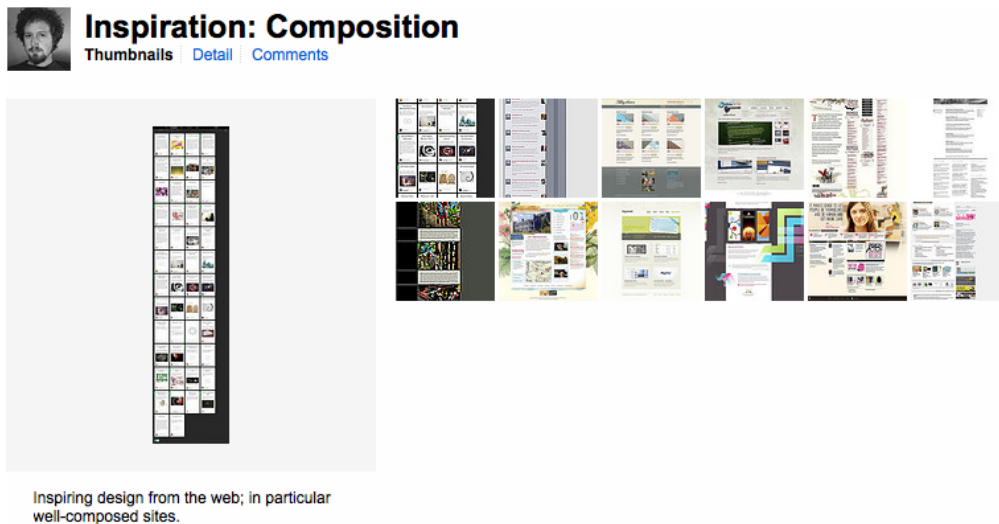


Figure 2.11. My set of composition examples<sup>16</sup>

## Functionality Inspiration

Our site will contain a number of functional elements, like navigation mechanisms, a ticket purchase form, a schedule, and plenty more. It's useful to look at all the different ways other designers have chosen to implement each of these elements.

Chris Messina<sup>17</sup> has been collecting examples of user interface (UI) design on Flickr for years now, and his collections go beyond pure inspiration into the realm of an indispensable resource. You'll also find a wealth of UI examples collected at Pattern Tap,<sup>18</sup> where users have collected, tagged and commented on widgets from all over the Web.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.flickr.com/photos/elliottjaystocks/sets/72157612161071649/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://factoryjoe.com/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://patterntap.com/>

## Shopping & Checkout



Thumbnails | Detail | Comments

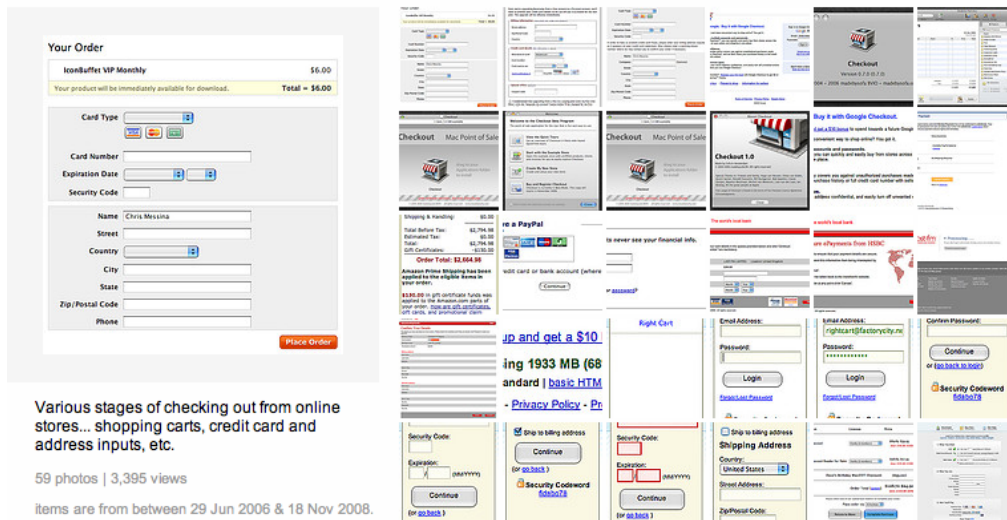


Figure 2.12. Chris Messina's design pattern sets on Flickr<sup>19</sup>

## Look Outside the Web

I'm a keen believer in the idea that if you only use web sites for inspiration, you'll only ever build a web site that looks like other web sites. Of course there's nothing wrong with that—it's essential that a web site looks and behaves like one—but you risk your design growing stale if you search for stimuli in only one place.

There's a whole world out there full of outstanding design—architecture, fashion, product, packaging ... why confine yourself to one medium and limit your creative potential? Take your trusty camera and go for a walk—collect photos of signs, textures, anything that grabs your fancy. Doodle in a notebook whenever you have an interesting idea. Before you know it, you'll have a huge collection of inspiring material from the real world.

If you look at the world of print design in particular, you'll see most of the same principles of web design at work. After all, the new discipline of web design is derived from years of print design tradition, but with a few of the limitations and freedoms reversed. So there's still plenty of inspiration we can take from the print design world to better inform what we can achieve on the Web. I've collected some offline examples in—you guessed it—another Flickr set, shown in Figure 2.13.

<sup>19</sup> <http://flickr.com/photos/factoryjoe/collections/72157600001823120/>

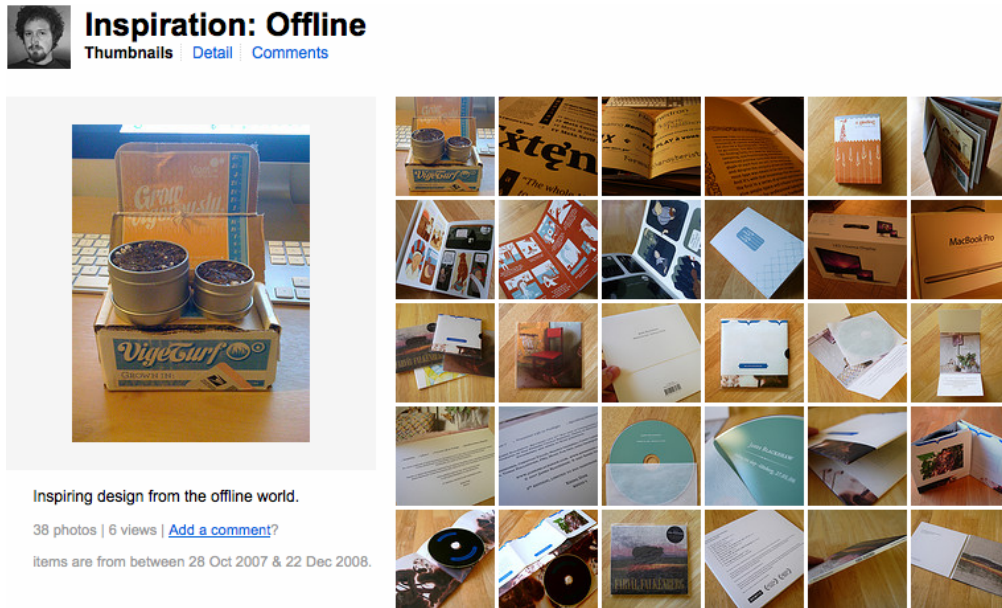


Figure 2.13. My offline inspiration set

## Collection Tools

I've been saving interesting and inspiring snippets in my Flickr profile, but it's not the only way.

RealMac Software<sup>20</sup>—the team behind web development application RapidWeaver—have recently released LittleSnapper,<sup>21</sup> a Mac application that allows you to collect sources of inspiration from the Web and share them with your peers. It's a nifty new tool for Mac-based designers, and one I'd heartily recommend.

For Windows users, TechSmith's Snagit<sup>22</sup> application captures screenshots and screen images, with a library you can use to organize your screenshots by tags, URLs, and date.

Then there's Evernote,<sup>23</sup> suitable for both Mac and Windows, an all-encompassing note-keeping application that you can access from just about everywhere, thanks to versions for your desktop, phone, and web browser. You can create, upload, and save images, text and audio, and if there's text contained within the image, Evernote's optical character recognition (OCR) engine will identify it and make it searchable. That's very handy for when your notes archive becomes rather large!

<sup>20</sup> <http://realmacsoftware.com/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://realmacsoftware.com/littlesnapper/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.techsmith.com/screen-capture.asp>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.evernote.com/>