

WEB DEVELOPMENT



SUCCESS IS IN THE DETAILS

Do All Your Pieces Fit?

by Michelle Szabo

Details...that is what a profession or specialization is all about. Whether you are talking about an auto mechanic, a film producer, an attorney, or a web designer – the details are what make or break their successes. Think about it...

- ...if the book you were reading had typos and poor sentence structure...
- ...if your mechanic fixed your car, but left it filthy dirty (OK, many do, but I bet you'd go back to the one that didn't before the one that left it dirty)...
- ...if a film producer forgot that the lead actor's hair was up in one shot and down in another for the same scene...
- ...if your attorney showed up in court wearing ripped jeans and the opposing side was brandishing a tidy suit...
- ...who would have the upper hand?

Upon first impression, the person who paid attention to the details would. And, a first impression may be all that you have...no matter how compelling your message. That does not mean that things always have to be flashy and in your face. It does mean that the reader must be compelled to look further, to learn something, to understand without confusion, to enjoy their experience as much as possible. These are the things that will keep them coming back.

You must follow through and pay attention to the details to be sure that all the pieces of your message fit – the words, the visuals, the sound, the organization, the functionality and the usability.

Why People Go to Web Sites

When people go to a web site, they are looking for information first – information that answers their questions and fulfills their needs. It may be the first place they see your entire message. They are processing the information that you are presenting to them in a variety of ways. So, why not give them what they are after – good information that is well organized and is pleasing to look at.

What is Most Important?

Every word is important because people think upon them and their meanings. Visuals are important to bring people to your words. Sounds can enhance the communication of your words and visuals. The programming is vital as well. A carefully planned execution of all of these elements adds up to placing less demand on your audience and increases your chances of retaining them. A visitor that is impressed by or somehow drawn to "the look" is the visitor that is compelled to read on.

Remember the children's game of "What's Wrong with this Picture?" When people start to see little things wrong with a web site, they start to wonder if you really care. I am not saying that every single thing will be flawless. Let's face it, we are human and web sites are built by humans. A concerted effort to make sure everything is correct, tested and presented in a way that makes the site compelling is the least you can do for your site visitors. However, don't be too surprised if a little flaw rears its ugly head a few months after launch. The more complex your web site, the more likely this is to happen, so it pays to pay very close attention to all those little details and test, test, test!

So, What Does a Web Site Need?

Web sites need a lot of things, but to start with, they need the following:

- well-written, well-edited and well-organized content
- pleasing graphics that lead the eye to your content
- fluid navigation without dead end or confusing links
- interactivity that engages the visitor
- invisible programming (the site must work as expected without any errors)
- a way to efficiently expand content areas in the future

These are the things that you pay a web developer to do.

Create a Thread

To make your message strong, it has to have a thread. So, what is a thread? They are the visual, auditory (if any) and verbal lines of thought that tie the pages of a site together. Take CNN for example...look at how their navigation works. Look at the continuity in the sizing of headers, the placement of ads, the organization of content, the grid (columns and rows) upon which all pages sit. How about Yahoo!? They also have massive amounts of content, but it is very accessible in most places. Neither CNN nor Yahoo! are very exciting from a visual perspective, but you can bet that a team of designers are guiding the placement of

every element on the page in order to maintain the organization's message and vision. Because of this attention to design, the impeccable programming and valuable content, you have a winning combination and visitors come back again and again. Their success is in their details!

Organize and Write Flawlessly

Some people are endowed with the ability to organize their thoughts into cohesive messages that their audience understands. If you cannot do this yourself...hire someone to do it. Often times, you have a good enough idea of how things are to be organized, but cannot find the right words to compel your audience to read further. Whatever you need a content specialist or copywriter for, work closely with them and be sure that your message is their top priority and that they can take direction in order to communicate that message. Even though you might think that you can do it all yourself, think about the demands you will place upon yourself when your web designer says to you...“OK, where is that content?” You can't just give them a bunch of brochures and slides and expect a web site created out of them. Doing so would be an injustice to yourself and your message. There can be quite a bit of work in formulating the architecture and functionality of a web site in order to project your message successfully. This organization is part of

**A WEB DEVELOPER...OR NOT A WEB DEVELOPER?
THAT IS THE QUESTION.**

Just because someone calls themselves a web developer, does not mean they can get your web site done right. Chances are that your neighbor's son and your friend from school are not web developers. Just because someone is a good programmer, does not make them a competent web developer. Just because someone can create an amazing painting or illustration or print design, does not mean they understand how to pull a web site together. Just because someone can create inspiring video, film or 3D animations, does not mean that they can make a web site communicate to an audience. That does not mean that these people cannot create a good web site. As a matter of fact, many can. But, don't take it for granted.

Finding a Web Developer

Specialties are called that for a reason...because people specialize, they understand the details. A web developer is someone (or a group of someones) that can deliver on the needs of your site. Look at their work. Ask what they did for the sites they show you. Some people will tell you they worked on a site and come to find out that this amazing site was really created by another developer and the person you are talking to just created the header art for each page under the strict guidance of an art director. As nice as it may be, they don't necessarily have the skills to do the rest of the site. They might create a site that is somewhat acceptable, but have missed the opportunity to serve you better by not having enough expertise to exploit all of the functional, visual and editorial opportunities that are available.

what a content developer (or sometimes a copywriter) can help you do and it is the foundation of a web site.

Use Visual Cues

We are a visual society. "A picture is worth a thousand words." Why not use that to your advantage? Visual cues can easily lead your site visitors through your web pages. It helps them and allows you to accent specific areas. People can quickly grasp what you are about and where they should look. If you look professional, you will be perceived to be professional and your message will be well received.

The Internet is a visual medium. 'Visual garbage' is still one of the most often seen mistakes on web sites. This includes too many rules, borders, colors, sizes, busy backgrounds and things that go flash in the night. Bad use of negative space or total lack thereof is another. The space without content is just as important as the space with content. (Designers learn this in their first year of schooling.) Poor use of color palettes, backgrounds and graphics are still rampant on the web today. These are the mistakes that you pay a designer not to make.

Just in case you may be thinking that design is not that important...according to a study conducted by Forrester Research, three out of four factors most likely to drive repeat visitors to a web site were design related: ease of use, download time, and freshness. Also, IBM attributes a recent re-design of their site to a 400% increase in sales!

Makes Sure Your Site Works – Correctly and Quickly

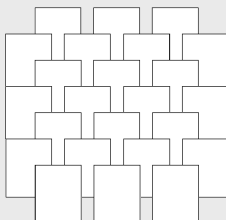
A web site that is slow, has bad links, takes you to pages you don't expect or generates errors is just plain frustrating. Be sure the programming on the site delivers your objectives and is thoroughly tested. Think about how you would like your web site to integrate into your daily business practices. An experienced programmer can help you with this. Be clear in your expectations of how each area of the web site should function. There is nothing more frustrating to a programmer than programming "on-the-fly." Before a line of code is written, your programmer should outline where the speed bumps are likely to be. Just as a video/film/animation production is storyboarded to help the client understand the action, so should a web site be outlined in great detail. If you are too vague, expect to be

THE MYSTERIOUS DATABASE AND THE ZERO RULE

How do you know if your site needs a database?

First, let's define "a database." A database is a collection of information (usually, but not always, text) that is kept in a remote file (or files)...the information does not technically reside in each web page. A web site could have hundreds of products, but you could display them all individually on the same basic page. Each image would have the following associated with it: an image, a title, a description, a size, a price, etc. You would only need to develop one page for the site that displays each image and its related information. So, a database allows you to create less pages and keep your content consistently displayed across many pages.

Hundreds of web pages to be updated individually.



OR

One template page that allows you to change the text and images on each item through the database, which updates your web pages.



The Value of a Database

Take a look at a simple site we created for a local artist (www.randylagana.net). He was having an awful time with his "developer" and could never get the site finished, consistent or updated. We created a site that is backed by a free database solution (Microsoft's Access, small in the world of databases) and programmed the web pages to 'go get' each image with its associated information as it was requested and 'drop it' into the same template page. By taking this all a little further, we allowed categories to be added and the navigation could be expanded on-the-fly as well. Randy now updates his site himself and his angst level has dropped to near 0%. In addition, it costs him \$0 out-of-pocket to update his web site! Yep, that's the 'Zero Rule' – zero \$ and zero angst.

You can learn more about databases and other web-related content in the future at White Lights Concepts' web site at: www.whitelightconcepts.com/news.php

charged more as development will take longer to complete due to re-thinking, re-working and re-coding.

Experience + Expertise = Efficiency

The cost of developing a web site is not limited to the amount of the check you write. It can also cost a lot of your time. Hiring someone with experience will greatly reduce the time you need to devote to the details. You should still plan to spend time, but it should be directed and deliberate, not wasted. Experienced developers will guide you through each step and tell you specifically what they need you to do.

A web site requiring monthly updates may need a database backbone, where you can add content through an administrative console and avoid relying on your developer for simple updates. This can lower your costs in the long run. Ask your developer to supply you with a comparison of costs so you can decide intelligently.

Bringing it All Together

Although I have been writing a lot about details, seeing the parts as a whole is just as important. When you are trying to send people a message, they need to understand what that overall message is in a few short words and/or images. This is what advertising is based on and although web sites are not ads as you see them in TV or magazines, a smart web site takes it's cues from advertising...at least a little. If your web site looks like it has a lot of content, that's fine (good, as a matter of fact). It can even look like CNN. But, if all that content does not look like it is part of the same message, then your message becomes weak and falls apart. People won't want to drag themselves through the content if it is too hard to find what they are looking for or if they end

up in places they don't expect. People's time is valuable and you need to treat it that way when you develop a web site. Don't make them work harder than they have to.

Legalities

No matter how simple your site, you should have something on it that protects your organization. A basic Terms of Use and Privacy Policy will certainly help. However, it does not take the place of a good attorney. Consult one and use the suggestions they make. If you sell things on your site, if you collect information, if you make promises of any kind, you should be sure that you help your site visitor understand how the information and offerings apply to them.

A Web Site is About Business

Let's face it, web development is about business (unless you are an artist and then it's still about business, but I won't say that out loud). A web site is an investment in your business and a communications tool. Your content must be organized, accessible to the site visitor in as few clicks as possible and presented in short, digestible chunks that are a visual read whenever possible. Use text in visual ways and use graphics and pictures to enhance your information. Just don't overdo it.

People must understand your web site quickly. If people are confused by your web site, they will get frustrated and leave.

You DO have a better chance of success when all of the pieces fit . ***Do all your pieces fit?***

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