Basics of Web Design, introduction to web site design and web page design skills

This section provides basic skills for web site design and designing good usable web pages, through insight into the core thinking that supports the design of effective and usable web sites.

You can make web sites both pleasurable and functional, appealing and usable. In fact, this should be your goal as a designer.

Scanning

The #1 most important feature to appreciate about browsing behaviour is scanning. Web sites designed to be looked at are likely to fail. Web sites designed to be scanned are more likely to succeed.

Instead of starting at the top and reading downwards, most people have learnt that they get better results by scanning over the page, looking for certain clues.

What most people do is click on the first thing that appears to offer a fairly good chance of being the right thing.

How to aid scanning

To aid scanning, we can:

a. have insight into what features will be most relevant and important to the user.
b. know how to apply visual styles and techniques to help point the eye towards those elements, and skip over the unimportant elements (see the graphic design section for specific articles & tutorials).

Content 101

It's risky to start a design before paying close attention to what a site will feature and why.
A good site design creates a structure that enables a clear two-way dialogue with all its users.

**Content is our problem**
A lot of designers think that web design is about the interface, and that content is what's added on later.

Designing for the content should be the designer's problem and focus, because content is the key to success.

Remember the purpose of design: **To enable communication between the consumer and the content.**

**Designing for communication**
It always helps to have a framework to start from, so that we're not designing into thin air. A good way to build a framework is to list what a site has to say, and then prioritise those messages. I like to picture an active two-way conversation between the site and the user.

**How people use web pages**
To create **designs that work in the real world**, we must appreciate the way they'll **really** be used.

**How designers look at web pages**
- We appreciate balance, depth, richness, and surprises
- We enjoy looking at designs
- We stare long and hard **at** the complete screen

**How real people use web pages**
- They move quickly because **they don't like looking at the screen**
- **They're impatient** - they tend to click the first promising link, and often don't wait for pages to finish loading
- **They don't like to read, scanning text quickly for clues**
- They're looking **for** things to help them do what they want to do

**People are impatient**
**We decide in as little as 1/20 of a second whether a site is appealing or not.**

We scan pages for clues that "You're in the right place"
When searching, we often don't even wait for the page to load, before deciding whether to click back, or follow a link (Note: Principle of putting the most important stuff at the top so it loads and is seen first.)

**Factors that influence the browsing experience**

**Cultural sensitivity: I don't know you, you don't know me**

- Use simple language, to help users whose first language isn't the same as yours
- Don't assume the user trusts your brand, just because they're on your web site. Treat everyone as though you need to earn their respect.

**You don't know how the user got here**

You can't always be sure what route a user has taken to get to your web page.

**What we can do**

- Provide enough information on each page to make it clear what the site is about, where you are in the site, what's on the page, what is elsewhere and how to get what you want.

**Variation in Fonts**

Best practice style (in my opinion) is:

```html
font-family:verdana,helvetica,arial,sans-serif;
```

Only use other faces at particular times when quick, mass readability is less of a priority. e.g. It's okay to use a serif face in a large size for headers; and it's okay to use fixed-pitch faces (e.g. Courier) for code snippets. The rest of the time, stick with the general sans, and concentrate your creative energies elsewhere.

**The Brain's strengths**

One way to think about designing for web users is to consider what the brain is good at, and to design to take the best advantage of those strengths.

We have an amazing ability to associate shapes with their meanings very quickly.

Our brains are great at spotting associations between objects, based on similarities, alignment and grouping.
When we match shapes and patterns, we quickly sort what to focus on from what to ignore.

**How to design to the brain's strengths**

**Matching shapes**
We can use the power of shape-recognition to convey desired meanings. We do this by applying recognisable signs where appropriate, using tone, colour and contrast to help direct the user's eye toward the most important elements.

**Seeing patterns**
We can take advantage of the user's pattern-matching ability, by using techniques of alignment, proximity, hierarchy and containment to create correct visual messages.

Elements are more distinguishable when they:

- Have significant tonal and/or colour **contrast** compared to other elements
- Have **white space** around them (helps define a shape)
- Are big enough

**Focusing on the important; ignoring the unimportant**
When designing a page, we can help users be successful by making the most useful elements more noticeable, and making less important elements recede.

- Simple, conventional, recognisable layouts that you know work will be more likely to work for your users than complicated, innovative designs.
- A simple message will be understood better than a complicated one

**Don't Decorate, Communicate**

1. **Remember how brains work**

If brains can't find the sense and order they need, they soon grow exasperated and give up.

The best print designers know this. They've also learned that, the more elaborate the design, the greater the risk of confusion. That's why they usually steer clear of fussy and showy designs.

Instead, their layouts have a 'quieter' feel, with all the individual elements directed at letting the page information unfold as easily as possible. Headlines, subheads, body
copy point size, pictures, colours - all are used to 'signpost' the route the good designer wants the reader to take through the material placed before him. A route that's guaranteed to leave him feeling better informed, and better served, at journey's end.

2. Remember how eyes move

In our culture, we're trained from the moment we start reading to scan from left to right, starting from the top left of the page and working down to bottom right. Our eyes don't like to have to constantly readjust their focus. It just leads to strain.

All these stylistic touches may look really cool. And result in something you'd love to hang on your wall. But that's not the goal, is it? Your aim is to make life easier for your reader.

The Golden Rule

*Everything* that goes into your web site must have a purpose.

Every single element and decision must help users achieve their goals and support the site's goals.

Web Design Conventions

Design conventions are informal rules that have been adopted over time, and have become embedded in visual culture. They reduce the amount of decoding a user has to do.

Conventions make the designer's job easier, meaning we don't have to invent solutions for common problems, and letting us concentrate on specifics.

- Early web browsers rendered text hyperlinks in blue, underlined format. This convention has endured for a decade, even though it is not the easiest format to read.

- If you want to go to a web site's home page, you'll look first at the top-left of the screen for a logo or a button with the word "Home" on it. No-one told you to do this, you've learnt from experience.

- If you see A set of | Words | Separated by | Little vertical lines at the bottom of a web page, you assume that they are a set of general links within the web site you're on. The only reason that should be the case is that you've learnt the convention from other sites.
Branding for Web Sites

A Brand is the rich combination of personality and promise that your web site projects to its consumers.

If done well, your brand image can inform your consumers' thinking about your market position, value, quality, price, service level, heritage, size, and anything else that matters.

Web Page Tone of voice

Active voice is important: present what "you can do" or "what you can get", e.g. "Register for our newsletter" / "Log in" / "More about Service A".

Stanford Guidelines for Web Credibility

http://credibility.stanford.edu/guidelines/index.html

The Sphere of Design

The web design community thankfully seems to be wrapping up the "design vs. usability" argument.

In case you missed it, the conclusion was: "Not either/or but both, and it depends."

Design leaders have proved that web sites can be both usable and beautiful, but we lack a vocabulary to talk about this new standard.

The question now is not "Which is most important?", but "How do we deliver what's most important?"

This article introduces the "Sphere of Design", which is a simple conceptual model that illustrates the relationship and trade-offs between 'looks' and 'works'.

The purpose of visual design is to facilitate communication.

Usability is a central element to successful design.

creating a successful web site is all about design - finding the best solutions to solve communication problems.

Your web site can be both visually appealing and easy to use.

In fact, your web site should be both appealing and functionally powerful!
Beautiful and attractive visuals can encourage visitors to stick around a little longer, or explore a little deeper, enhance a particular experience, and make a product appealing enough to buy.

**The Sphere of Design**

I define **Aesthetic richness** as a function of beauty, attractiveness, emotional depth, and visual impact.

**Functional richness** equates to usefulness, which is an aggregate of ease-of-use and functional power.

Note that this applies only to visual design, where the object is to create a visual product that has some communication aspect. It doesn't apply to fine art or engineering.
The Arc of Excellence

Web sites that hit the new standard exhibit an optimum balance of aesthetic and functional qualities.

One of the most basic and important things for a designer to have in mind before designing is a clear idea of where the product should sit on this spectrum. Where on the boundary of excellence should your site sit? Which imperatives are stronger: the functional or aesthetic, or what is the balance?

Then, the designer should purposefully create a product that hits that mark. This requires a lot of discipline.

A site whose main objectives are strongly functional and user-task-oriented (e.g. ticket booking, information-retrieval, banking services) should aim for the North point of the golden crescent.

A site whose main objectives are softer (e.g. brand promotion, entertainment, lifestyle) should aim for the East point of the golden crescent.

Most sites ought sit somewhere between these extremes.

Designers succeed when they first select the right target, i.e. balance between functional and aesthetic/emotional richness, and then hit that target.

Some examples of sites that hit their marks

To show that the new standard is obtainable, here is a handful of excellent sites that I think meet it. They demonstrate most of the functional/aesthetic range, and I think that they all hit their intended mark.
• Mozilla.org
• Stylegala.com
• Jewelboxing.com
• Southern Coastal Watershed Excursion
• Firewheel.com
• Designchapel.com

Placing a range of excellent sites on the sphere of design