

Web sites That Work: Getting the Basics Right

7 basics to consider

- A clear purpose
- A defining creative idea
- Logical architecture and navigation
- Required functionality and effects only
- Exploit the evolving creative palette
- A unique part of the overall communications mix
- Consistency with the overall brand platform

Enough hype already! We've all seen a mountain of articles about how the Internet is changing business forever. Most companies by now accept that they need some form of interactive presence (though many still don't know exactly how to do it). So, we don't need to be sold on the Internet promise anymore.

Instead, people should now be focusing on the really tough job: creating distinction and meaning for brands on the Internet.

This is not such an easy task. At least, it is not as easy as the hype would make everyone believe. There are many interactive brands fighting for the same space today. The truth is, many of these interactive brands will fail and the mortality rate will be high. If they hope to survive and thrive, companies on the Internet today must answer some critical questions: What will be essential to differentiate and distinguish their Web site?, how can their Web site break through the increasing cyber clutter?, and what will allow their Web site to become an enduring part of people's lives and not some short-lived dot.com experiment?

The answer to all of these involves getting the communication basics right. Seems obvious enough. Yet somehow, what has gotten lost amongst the dot.com frenzy is the fact that Interactive is not really about technology or the latest Internet business models – it's about great marketing ideas brought to life in a compelling and engaging form that's useful to people. So while the Internet is ushering in a number of new rules about business, the old rules of communicating with people still apply. Web sites that have function but no real brand values or human connection will not stand the test of time.

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A Defining Creative Consistency

As un-sexy as it sounds, getting the communication basics right from the start will determine long-term success for many e-players. Therefore, companies should look to some basic guideposts if they hope to ensure that their Web sites will be effective and compelling:

A Clear Purpose: The first issue is the most obvious: Is there a clear reason for having a Web site? Many companies feel they “have to” rush to the Net, though they can’t articulate exactly why. A Web site, of course, has many functions: It is an advertising vehicle, a potentially new distribution system, a consumer data gathering vehicle, and a relationship-building vehicle, all rolled into one. Many companies expect their Web site to deliver all of the above. But when the time comes to make decisions for the various aspects of the Web site, clients will need to know their priorities. If a company doesn’t know exactly why they are developing a Web site, they shouldn’t continue the process until they have defined a clear purpose and set of goals for it.

A Defining Creative Idea: A Web site, like any effective piece of communication, must have a creative idea at its center to engage, involve, and interest a consumer.

Some companies think they have the luxury of boring consumers; their brochure-ware tells the world what they want to say from a manufacturer’s point of view. But that certainly won’t cut it today. Internet surfers have a few million other Web sites only a mouse click or two away – they won’t tolerate being bored with a site that doesn’t involve them or help them. An idea – a creative spark – is the key to the site’s stickiness.

Granted, many Web sites, banner ads, and interstitials today don’t stir people’s creative passions. Some Web sites, in fact, have been likened to the phone book in their lack of ability to elicit emotions. But this is exactly why communications professionals should be so excited about this medium right now – what a great opportunity to have creativity make a truly meaningful difference for brands that sorely need it. As Web sites continue to proliferate, and the battle for distinction amongst Internet brands intensifies, creative ideas will indeed separate the winners from the losers.

Logical Architecture and Navigation:

One of the great revolutions of Internet technology is the move from linear to random access communication. When, for example, was the last time you watched a TV commercial in the order you chose? Traditional communication leads the consumer by the hand. The Internet, on the other hand, enables consumers to roam at will. One of the critical elements, therefore, of a successful Web site is how well it enables a viewer to roam. Has the Web site been structured in a way that makes it easy and intuitive to navigate through? Are there so many links that people might actually be confused by choice? Should you use a central mnemonic or visual to help consumers easily maneuver through your site? Thoroughly considering this issue will allow companies to avoid a common pit-fall of many sites today: burdening the user with an often frustrating labyrinthine structure.

Required Functionality and Effects Only:

Not surprisingly, one of the common characteristics of people who develop Web sites is that they are obsessed with new things. So, as new technologies or techniques become available, they want to utilize them.

Explore the Evolving Creative Palette Clear

Required Functionality and Effects Only

Logical Architecture and Navigation

New technology can be great. But it shouldn't overwhelm the idea of the Web site. So as people discuss the functionality and effects planned for their Web site, they need to be confident they will be adding value to the site. It's worth asking whether the plug-ins and peripherals are serving a real purpose or are they just there for the glitz? More so, does the inclusion of this make the Web site cumbersome and annoying to utilize or download? After all, not every consumer is armed with the latest model of computer and high-speed modem. So determining whether the technology is maximizing the site or just adding a burden to it is essential.

Exploit the Evolving Creative Palette: The rapid development of technology offers a constantly evolving creative palette on the Internet. What was unthinkable last year might be reality next year. So utilizing new technology – when it's relevant – to help bring a creative idea to life in a new way is critical to keeping a site contemporary and topical for users. Particularly as more broadband technology comes online, there will be a huge amount of new creative rope to work with to execute ideas on the Internet.

A Unique Part of the Overall Communications Mix:

The best Web sites add something new and unique to the communications mix. After all, given the dynamism and possibilities of the medium, the Web site would be failing if it didn't offer something superior in the mix. How is the Web site going to help your customers in new ways? What is it allowing you to do or say about the brand that you wouldn't be able to do or express as well with another form of communication?

Consistency with the Overall Brand Platform:

While offering something unique in the mix, a Web site must also be fundamentally consistent with the brand's overall character. Again, it seems obvious. But look at how many Web sites there are out there today that have little or no relation to the other communication you see for a brand.

Consistency is critical over time as well. After all, launching a Web site is the beginning of a process, not the end. Web sites take more perseverance than running a corporate newsletter. Many managers know too well how this type of undertaking often begins with a flurry of excitement, only to have

Overall

that initial enthusiasm wane as the persistent demands of the task become more evident. Web sites take commitment. Content needs to be changed so that it remains fresh. If there are customer feedback loops, the information needs to be utilized and queries need to be answered. The key will be to ensure that the brand essence remains consistent throughout.

The bottom line is that a Web site is more than a business model in action – it's a piece of communication meant to connect with human beings on the other end. The old advertising maxim that consumers don't care what the storyboard looked like is true for Web sites as well. When people visit a Web site, all the client-agency effort that went into discussing it won't matter if people don't enjoy the experience of the final product. So a basic question that's worth asking is whether the site creates a human experience. Will your Web site teach, instruct, amuse, excite, or challenge the visitor? Will it make the difference that will keep users coming back?



Consistency with the Overall Brand Platform