

Design Issues

Getting information coded, onto a web server, and across tens of thousands of miles of wires and routers is easy. The hard part is designing the page so that the information travels the final 18 inches from the reader's screen to their understanding. This involves far more than writing coherent sentences and paragraphs. It involves how the information looks, how it is laid out, and how it draws attention to itself. It also involves how it makes the reader's eyes move. For instance, centered text is difficult to read because it forces the reader to search and find the beginning of each line.

In the Information Age, it is information that will compete for attention, in much the same way that products on store shelves competed for attention in the industrial age. We have to learn not only how to produce a compelling message, but also how to package the information so that it is:

- Inviting,
- Easy to read, and
- Easy to understand

Here are just a few tips for designing your web pages.

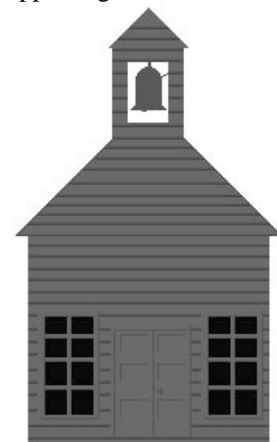
1. Goals, Goals, Goals

Your first, last, and middle consideration in making all design decisions are your goals and objectives. Anything that you can do in the design of your web pages that helps you accomplish your goals is good design. What you want to accomplish with your website will always outweigh the rest of these suggestions.

2. Use images deliberately

In the information age, information is the commodity, and the currency is time. People are seeking information and they are paying for it with their time. Text takes very little time to load through the Internet. Images, on the other hand, take a great deal of time. If an image does not help you accomplish your goals, then it is an unnecessary expense. If it does not help you accomplish your goals, then do not use it. This is not to say that your web pages should have no images at all. Certainly, one of your goals is to project an image of professionalism. Use textures, and borders to make your page more appealing and easier to use. But be sparing with your images.

It is important to note that the file type of your image has a lot to do with its size and the amount of time it takes to load through the Internet. The two image file types that are compatible with the web are GIF (*Graphics Interchange Format*) and JPEG (*Joint Photographic Experts Group*). Some images produce small files when saved as GIF, while others are smaller when saved as JPEG. For instance, the picture of a schoolhouse on the right, drawn with a graphics program, is 10 kilobytes in size when saved as a JPEG file, and only 4 kilobytes when saved as GIF. On the other hand, images that have higher resolution,



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more colors, i.e., scanned photographs or pictures taken with a digital camera will produce smaller files when saved as JPEG.

4. Use white space

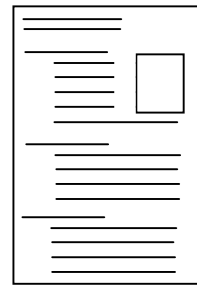
Don't think of white space as an absence of content. Use white space to draw attention to content. If you have a block of information that you want the viewer's eye to be drawn to, place a buffer of white space around it. If there is a bulleted list on a page that is of special importance to your web customers, place white space in from of the bullets.

Carefully placed white space can also give a web page a polished and professional look. Along with small and well designed images, white space can be used to give a web page a graphic intensive look, without taking a minute and a half to load.

5. Information layout and presentation -- design for scanning

Most people do not come to the Internet to read. They come to the Internet to learn. If they want to read, they curl up by a fire with a good book.

People scan web pages rather than read them from top to bottom. They are usually looking for information. This is why you should design your pages for scanning. Identify text that your web customers might be looking for and bold the text, or color it, or make it a different size. You want to distinguish the text from the surrounding information so that it will draw the scanning eye. You want to create eye magnets on your page.



Use hanging indents to design for scanning. Headings and subheadings should be bold, perhaps larger, but also justified to the left of the screen (headings should not be centered). The text or content beneath the headings should be indented. This way, the person who is scanning your page can easily pick up the headings to the left and then shift over to the content when they find something interesting.

6. Menu size

Try to keep your page menus to less than seven items. People are less likely to read a long menu, preventing them for visiting any of the valuable links from your page. If menus offer fewer than seven options, then people are more likely to read them and to link to the information that will help them solve their problem.

If you need to have more than six options from a single page then have more than one menu listing. Select the most important options, the ones that would be most relevant to most of your readers, and make them a main menu with large and bold text, and attention grabbing bullets. This is the menu that would draw the readers eye. Then if they see value in your website from this main menu, then their eyes will wonder to other less attracting menu listings.

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7. Page size

Working a mouse is work. The less you make people use their mouse, the happier they are and the more positively they take your information. This requires that you make lots of decisions regarding page size. Your choices frequently are having a long web page that forces the reader to use his or her mouse to scroll endlessly down the page, or having lots of short pages, requiring the reader to continue to click options from a menu.

Usually it is preferable to have smaller pages. They are easier to manage for the reader and give a greater sense of organization. However there are two very good reasons to go with longer pages. If the nature of the information and its use might cause the reader to scan the page for occurrences of specific words or phrases, then the long page has an advantage. The reader can use the Find feature that is in most browsers to search the entire contents of the page for the word or phrase.

Another advantage of longer pages is the ability to print them. If the information is such that people would want to have a printed copy, then they can print the single long page once. If the information is divided into several shorter pages, then the user will have to print many times to get all of the information.

Another important consideration is the fact that most people do not scroll down a web page...at all. Their decision to scroll depends on what they see at the top of the page. Therefore, the top six inches of your web page is the most crucial part. This is where you place your hook. This is where you advertise the information, convincing the reader that he or she should want to scroll further.

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