

Web Design – the benefits of simplicity

As the internet has grown to become a mega-network of millions of computers across the whole world, the world wide web of internet sites has grown with it. There are web sites for every conceivable interest, in a multitude of styles. At the most basic level all websites are trying to achieve the same thing. Whether the site is a family blog, the shop-front of an online retailer, or a social networking site such as Facebook or MySpace, they are all attempting to tell the viewer what the author wants to say. To use the obvious analogy, they are all trying to sell something; either goods and services or ideas and thoughts.

The look of any website will depend on what it is trying to 'sell'. A website selling building materials to the construction industry needs a very different appearance to a political blog or a site promoting a rock band. They do, however, share one thing. They have to get the message across. There are situations where getting that message across means that the website needs to be at the cutting edge with a complex interplay of sounds and graphics, but in the vast majority of cases simplicity is the watchword. However much the temptation is to produce sites with beautiful Flash intros and rollover images, we need to remember that the web is in essence a text-based medium, and that content is everything. However cleverly we try to get the message across is of no avail if there is no message. I am not advocating a world wide web of vanilla sites that look like poorly formatted word documents, but suggesting that web sites should be simple and easy to navigate; with clear content that actually says what the author wants it to say. Here are some simple rules

- All content to be in text; i.e. none of the content should be graphical; the graphics are there to embellish the look of the site not impart information.
- The navigation should be text-based. Using CSS means we can produce highly attractive and stylish navigation without the need for images.
- The structure of the page should be clear and conventions such as underlining for hyperlinks should not be overridden unless it is obvious to the user without explanation.
- The site should use an appropriate colour palette avoiding any shimmering effects that could be detrimental to some users, such as those with photo-sensitive epilepsy
- The typography of the page should pay due account to what fonts users will tend to have on their computers, so stick font families that are part of the default font sets for Windows, Mac and Linux. Also ensure that the font colour is readable against the background for people with colour blindness.

These are important for several reasons. Any graphical text will not be recognised by screen readers thus excluding some users of the site. Limiting the graphics on a page decreases its bandwidth and thus the loading time. This reduces the possibility of users with slower browsers getting frustrated and leaving your site before you have had the opportunity to give them your message. Most importantly, a simple, well laid-out site gives the user a comfortable browsing experience, increasing the possibility of a return visit. Following these rules enhances your capacity to get your message across. I am not suggesting that websites should be entirely devoid of graphical content. There is a place for the judicious use of CSS to provide background images to elements of the page, and photographs and other graphics can form an integral part of the content of a page. The key issue is that although graphics can enhance the experience, the key element of a website is the text.

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