

## Keep It Simple Silly

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In the last article we looked at the importance of good web design and some of the common design mistakes which can make using the Internet a not altogether pleasant experience. In this article I want to look at one of the most overlooked areas of web site design - content and why keeping it simple really does work.

One fundamental mistake that is often made is the assumption that content is king - content isn't king on the web, neither for that matter is design. There is, and will always be only one king - the visitor - sometimes known as the customer. To produce successful content for a web site we have to know all about our visitors - what they are looking for and importantly, how they behave.

The Internet has spawned a whole new breed of visitor. They are not the type who enjoy a leisurely stroll down to the newsagents on a Sunday morning to pick up the paper and then happily spend the next hour or two browsing through it. On the contrary, they know what they are looking for and they are not prepared to wait for it. People visit the web for one key purpose, to find out information. Research recently undertaken in the USA revealed that 98% of users on the Internet are looking around with a specific goal and that the goal isn't to be entertained, it is to be informed.

Online visitors are impatient, if they can't find what they are looking for quickly and easily they will leave. Switching costs on the Internet are low. For example, if we go into a shop to buy something specific and cannot find it straight away, we will go to the effort of looking through the shop to find it. Even if there are large queues at the checkout, we stick it out because it just isn't worth the effort of walking down the street to find another shop, and be potentially faced with the same situation. On the Internet the next shop or company is only a mouse click away.

This new breed of visitor also reads differently. As you will know if you work with computers, reading off the screen isn't pleasant; it is much harder on the eyes than reading from paper. As a result online readers scan read, they skim the page looking for relevant information.

So once we know what our visitors are looking for and how they behave, how do we design and write content for websites? How do we satisfy the needs of this new impatient and fickle breed of visitor? The answer is by focusing on three core areas: navigation, information, and action.

When a visitor arrives at your site two questions are forefront in his or her mind: where am I and how do I move around? Visitors may not arrive directly at your home page; they may arrive via a search engine at a page buried deep in your site. They need to be able to find out quickly and easily how your site is organised and how to navigate it.

In terms of the information on the site, unfortunately extracting copy from your carefully crafted corporate brochure and placing wholesale onto the web won't work. This is because traditional printed text relies heavily on transitional phrases that link one section or page to the next. On the web each page must be capable of standing on its own. Secondly, text on the web needs to be clear and concise, remember that visitors will skim read, they don't have time for carefully crafted but long winded sentences. Present them with reams and reams of text for which they have to scroll endlessly down the page to view and they will go elsewhere.

Make it easy for them, use headlines to grab their attention and break chunks of text down into small paragraphs, better still use bullet points where possible. If you do have "reams" of useful text that you want to publish on your website, for example an annual report, then incorporate it as a PDF file. PDF files are quick and easy to download and present the information in a printer friendly format.

Don't forget the call to action, prompt your visitor to click to get to the next step. Make it easy for them to carry out your ultimate objective whether it be to make the purchase or to contact you. After all, the most attractive window display is pointless if you can't actually get into the shop to buy anything.

In summary, this new breed of visitor wants three key things: simplicity, speed and convenience. They will visit your web site to find out something. Having found it out, hopefully quickly and easily, he or she will want to carry out an action. If you keep it simple, you make it easy for them and they may reward you with their custom, make it difficult and they will go elsewhere. With over 20 million web sites to choose from and more than two billion pages of content the new breed of visitor can afford to be fussy.