

Style versus Substance

Chris Gledhill Managing Director, PDMS Ltd

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Would you let your seven year old son choose your next car? Let's face it, he has clear ideas about what is cool and what looks good, however he doesn't have to drive to work in it, park it to go on holiday, fill the tank or pay the insurance. Why then do some businesses invest so much in web sites designed by non-drivers? It is quite astonishing how often web projects for serious businesses are run by staff or suppliers who have absolutely no concept of the web as a business tool.

In this article I would like to identify some common mistakes and illustrate the consequences.

Flash - the name says it's all. It's flash, but it's not clever...(usually!) flash is an excellent technology which was designed to make more sophisticated animations possible via the web. Unfortunately this has led to an epidemic of web sites which are developed exclusively in flash, because you can. Used in this way flash reduces the number of users who can access a site, significantly increases download times before any content is visible at all and effectively disables many of the standard functions of a web browser such as the back button or the ability to bookmark a particular page within the site.

The browser equivalent of an invasion, however many times you click 'close', unwanted windows keep popping up, sometimes you even find that your start up page has been changed for you. This type of thing represents a combination of technical 'geekery' and marketing arrogance which is beyond belief. The technical guy thinks it is a good idea because he has worked out how to do it and marketing simply don't realise that an Englishman's screen is his castle and you invade it at your peril.

Obscure plug-ins - 'You need to download the Overweight Hip'n'cool Mega-plug-in-adaptor to view this page'. Quite simply, you have got to be giving me something very special once I've done it. In other words, specialist browser plug-ins can be very useful if they add significantly to the value of a site which is used regularly by the same individual, for example a security plug-in associated with a financial service. But they should not be required to use a general site.

Irritating sounds 'Hi - I'm Suzy. Welcome to the ScantyScandinavians.com' - which make everyone else in the office stare at you. Like animations and video clips, sound files can be a great way to impart specific information, however short clips added to home pages 'because we can' are incredibly irritating and should be avoided at all cost. The basic principle for all multimedia content has to be that it is there to add value to the user who makes a positive choice to view this content, and that the content lives up to its billing on the site.

Unnecessary registration. 'Please complete the following short questionnaire in order to log-on. Questions 382 to 400 are optional.' People are pretty savvy about the information that is relevant to the services offered by your site. Any request for information about the user should be treated like a dialogue, in which the reason for requesting the information and the value that will be provided in return are clearly communicated. If you want them to do you a favour say so!

A couple of other points which frequently arise when web sites are developed from a design perspective only, are resolution dependence: 'This site is only viewable at 1280 x 1024', browser specificity: 'Sorry, you're not using Netscape Version 4.242 (beta 4), so you cannot view this site.' and graphics for graphics sake, making sites unnecessarily unwieldy. All of these problems are a direct consequence of incorrectly applying design principles from other media to the web. For example, extracting huge chunks of static text and graphics from a brochure and copying it on to the website.

Almost 70 percent of consumers recently polled by Jupiter Research said they leave web sites when they can't quickly find what they're looking for; likewise, they don't have patience for disorganization or unnecessary bells and whistles. 84 percent of users say that slow download times, which are magnified by graphics and animation files, send them away

In conclusion some broad principles: Using the web is an active process unlike television which determines the pace of information flow and encourages passive viewing, consequently it is pointless to expect people to 'watch' adverts on the web.

Whilst every technology has its place, the capabilities of the latest graphics gizmo are no basis for the design of a web site. The starting point must always be the content and services to be delivered. In other words a flash animation may be the best way to illustrate how to replace the bag on your vacuum cleaner, but you are unlikely to make this the basis of your corporate home page.

Developing good web sites is a highly skilled technical activity which requires a mix of skills encompassing graphic design, software engineering and project management. Web development by enthusiastic amateurs is like representing yourself in court, fine for a speeding ticket, not good if it really matters.