

Define The Design of Your Website by Steven Boaze ©Copyright 2004

The single most important step before you begin designing your website is defining the structure and purpose of your site. Once you have your structure planned out, you can unleash your creative genius.

What kind of navigation buttons do you want? Would animations, photos or diagrams help get your message across? What sort of layout do you prefer? How will customers navigate through your site? While keeping in mind a few basic guidelines for attractive design, feel free to experiment and be creative with the look and feel of your site. It may help to draw your ideas on paper first. Decide which colors you want to use. Do you already have an attractive logo on your advertising, letterhead or business cards? Use it. Try to visualize any graphics you want to liven up your content. You may be able to find suitable images in an off-the-shelf clip art collection or on the web at one of the clip art repositories. Depending on the size of your company or business and your priorities, you may also want to consider paying a design professional to create the graphics for your site. Alternatively, you could invest some time and money buying and learning to use one of the many commercially available image editing programs.

Most websites utilize some variations of the same two or three layouts. The most common is a left navigation setup, in which you place logos and graphics along the top of the page, include links and navigation buttons along the left hand side, and place content below to the right. This layout draws attention to your logo while keeping navigation in a set position. Another common layout places both graphics and navigation links along the top of the page. Focusing activity and attention at the top and creating more room for content below.

Before you get carried away with your newly found design freedom, however, remember that there are a few widely accepted design rules to keep in mind:

- * Make your site easy on the eyes. Use high contrast colors, dark text on a light background is easier to read. Patterned background designs, though an old popular one, are usually more distracting than appealing. You don't want your customers to skip reading about your big sale just because they can't stomach the dancing teddy bears behind the text.

- * Make your site easy to navigate. Place your links or buttons in a prominent place and keep them in the same place on every page. Your design should help users access the information you want them to see. To this end, keep your colors, layout and buttons consistent. Label every page so customers always know where they are. Every page should provide links back to the homepage.

- * Make your site professional and appropriate for your company or business. Your design, no less than your content, should support, complement and promote your business and it's products or services. Keep the design clean and simple. Remember, when it comes to design, white space is beautiful and less is more, unless you have a very unique product or service that is well served by something more avant-garde.

- * Check out the other guys. When it comes to design, you'll find that a little time spent looking at what other companies are doing will pay off handsomely. You'll discover for yourself what works and what doesn't. There are, unfortunately millions of poorly designed web sites on the internet - look for them and learn from their mistakes.

- * Write your content. Only after you've defined your goals and fully planned out your site should you actually begin to create your content. Avoid the temptation to just sit down and

start creating web pages. If you hold off until you've got a good plan in place, you'll save yourself a huge amount of time and effort in the long run.

Use your site plan or diagram to identify every page that will be on your website. You can number them, name them or find another way of listing them that works for you. You should already know generally what each page will contain (contact information, list of services, FAQ, products, photos, etc...). Now you need to decide exactly what you want on each page. Write all the text that should go on each page. Indicate where you want graphics or photos located. Create captions and sidebars. Organize each page around your navigation scheme, and plug in content where it fits.

* Make it short and sweet. Studies have repeatedly shown that internet users have a short attention span for text on the web. Few things on the internet are more intimidating and less inviting than a long page of text scrolling down into the distance. With few exceptions (articles, white papers or other publications), avoid long, uninterrupted word masses. Break up your content with visuals and decorations. Better yet, be concise. Customers aren't looking for dissertations on your products and services, they just need enough information to make an intelligent decision.

* Avoid scrollbars. Sometimes you'll need to make your visitors scroll down the page a bit in order to see all your content. But, if you have to scroll down more than an extra page height, it's a good indication that you have enough to split between several pages. This will give your visitors manageable chunks of text and keep them interacting with your site.

* Check, double check and triple check. Few things are more unprofessional than poorly written or misspelled text on your business website. And, inaccurate information is even worse. Nothing will destroy your credibility more quickly than misstating the facts. Read through everything you create, have someone else proofread, and run the text through a spell checker. Because not every web editing program includes one, you might want to create your content in a word processor and then copy your finished text into your web pages.

* Gather the site's components. After creating your content, gather all of your site's files together. If you've identified logos, buttons, photos or other graphics that you want to include, either create or collect the specific files you want to use and store them in a folder on your PC. Save the text you've written in the same folder. Keeping your content in one place will save you time and frustration when you are actually building your site.

* Create the pages. You're finally ready to make some web pages. You will most likely be creating your entire website in HTML (Hypertext Markup Language), so picking up an elementary understanding of the technology behind your site wouldn't hurt. Basically, HTML is a programming language that gives instructions to an internet browser, telling it how to display text and images. You've already created that text and collected those images; all you have left to do is arrange them on each page and define their appearance.

When creating your pages, follow two crucial rules of smart technology implementation:

1. Products should drive technology, not vice versa. When creating your web pages keep both your audience and your business objective in mind. The features you include and the technology you utilize should be appropriate to target your audience. Don't waste time and energy on bells and whistles that your customers won't appreciate or can't take advantage of. If you sell old fashioned widgets to a non-technical customer base, your visitors probably aren't interested in your prowess at creating cute scrolling messages on-screen. They just want to know if you sell the best widgets at the lowest price. At the same time, however, you should be prepared to take advantage of whatever technical enhancements suit your business needs. If you sell services that could benefit from the creation of collaborative and interactive community areas for your site with discussion boards, mailing lists and online customer surveys, then use them.

2. Speed is everything. Make a conscious effort to limit file sizes and keep download times to a minimum. Most web editing programs will estimate page load times, and you can test them yourself (use dial up connection to test) once you've posted each page to the web on your personal host server. Everyone who has surfed the internet has experienced the frustration of sitting around waiting for a site to load. Don't be that site. Optimize all of your images on your site for web delivery, reuse navigation buttons and logos wherever possible (this will improve page speed because the files have already been loaded once), and keep each page small enough to load quickly.

Steven Boaze, Chairman, is The Owner of Boaze.com Corporate Web Solutions which houses Web Development services.

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