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Top 10 Ways Websites Make Me Suffer **By Jason OConnor (c) 2004**

I believe some people create and publish websites for the sole purpose of tormenting their visitors. Browsing various websites and navigating the Web can often be like trying to read on an airplane while a kid kicks the back of your seat and the baby next to you alternates between screaming, crying and drooling on you. There are some excellent websites out there to be sure, but there are also a lot of dreadful ones too. The latter are the bane of so many people's existence, especially those who use the Web regularly.

The Net continues to grow in popularity and importance for consumers and businesses alike. Therefore, the quality of sites needs to keep pace. Creating and maintaining high-quality websites is more important now than ever. Higher quality equals more revenue.

The following lists the top ten ways that a website misses the boat and contributes to hair loss and nervous breakdowns. Notice the common thread that runs throughout each of these. Namely, a bad website neglects to consider the site visitor's experience in some fundamental ways.

1. Animation

Seven year-olds like watching animated cartoons on Saturday morning, business people, professionals and most other adults don't. Sites that include showy Flash animations as an 'Intro', animated gifs on every page, or flying words are really annoying. They take away from the content and distract the visitor from achieving their goals. Unless your site is an entertainment site, try to avoid maddening motion. However, if your product or service can be better demonstrated using Flash, Quick Time, or other multimedia, which is common, offer your visitors the chance to click a link to view it. But don't force them.

2. Too Much Scrolling

Once I scroll down a full screen's worth, my eyes start to blur, I feel slightly lost, my head spins and my interest wanes. Computer monitors really aren't the best medium for reading. The Net and many sites are so big that it's important to always provide a clear frame of reference for your visitors at all times while they're on your site. If a page requires two full screens of scrolling or more, simply split it up into multiple pages.

3. Long, Text-Heavy and Blocky Paragraphs of Unbroken Text

I really have to be into a topic or desperately need to glean the information to trudge through big chunks of unbroken text online. If I'm just shopping around for a product or service, you've lost me if I have to endure this kind of torture. Again, it is harder to read text on the Web than in other mediums such as books. Additionally, Web users are notoriously impatient, so make your content easy to read and non-intimidating. Use titles, sub-titles, small paragraphs, bullets and numbering.

4. No Obvious Ways to Contact The Company

If all you supply is an email on your website, your legitimacy may be questioned. Why can't you answer the phone? Why hide behind an anonymous and cold email address? Make it easy for your existing and potential customers to talk with you.

5. Unchanging or Out-Dated Content

If I start reading content on a site and soon discover that the content was written three years ago, I split. Since there's so much information out there, my reasoning is there's got to be

comparable information online that's more current. If you keep your content fresh your site will attract repeat visitors. And repeat visitors are more likely to turn into customers.

6. Long Page Downloads

It's amazing that this is still a problem. When I click on to a site and have to sit there waiting for it to appear in my browser, I start sweating, picking my teeth, tapping my toes, rolling my eyes and soon want to throw my computer through my office window. I'm obviously a little impatient, but again, I know there are other sites out there with the same information that will download more quickly, so why wait? I'm gone.

7. "Me, me, me!" instead of "You, you, you"

Generally speaking, no one cares about you, your company or your thoughts. What they do care about is what you can do for them. So sites that show pictures of the company building or tout their deep philosophy on the way business should be conducted really don't bode well for keeping the interest of site visitors. On the other hand, sites that speak directly to potential customers about how they can solve their problems, make their lives easier, safer, richer or more comfortable have a much better chance of keeping the eyeballs glued.

8. Non-Explanatory Buttons or Links

Here are some examples of buttons that leave me dazed and confused: A wedding site with a button called 'Blanks', a boating site with a button named 'The Lighthouse', a book site with a button called 'The Inside Story', or a Web design site with a button called 'Tea Time'. They sound like Jeopardy categories. Imagine trying to find your way on a highway where its various signs read 'Over Here', 'Moon Beams', and 'Lollypops'. Good luck navigating your way through. It's the same with navigating websites. Button and link names need to tell the visitor where the link leads to. Make it as easy as possible for a visitor to know where they're going before they click. However, there are times when naming a link an ambiguous name may pique the curiosity of a user and get them to click on it. But as a general rule, keep your links and buttons as descriptive as possible.

9. Inconsistent Navigation

Imagine sitting down at a restaurant and the waiter comes over to you and hands you five different menus, one for the appetizers, one for the soups and salads, one for the entrees, one for the desserts, and one for the drinks. Annoying. Now imagine if each menu had a different format, layout and method for listing the items. Brutal. I really don't want to work that hard at picking out my dinner, I'm hungry and I just want a meal. Don't make your visitors work hard either by expecting them to re-learn your navigation system each time they enter another section of your site. They too are hungry; for useful information and they're even more impatient.

10. Inconsistent Look & Feel

When the look & feel completely changes from one page to another in a website, I think I am visiting another site, another company, a partner or subsidiary. I get very confused. This screams poor planning and often results from tacking on new sections later after the original site was built. This can lead to design-drift. It may be tempting to stray from the original design; you may have a better design now. But wait till you do a complete next-generation re-design of the entire site before introducing a new look & feel. If not, lots of visitors will be scratching their heads with one hand and possibly clicking away with the other.

Finally, any site that employs a number of these notorious features is particularly painful to experience. When I click to a website that has five different fonts and colors, scrolls down to the core of the Earth, incorporates zinging words and big fat blocks of text, lists no phone number and has content written and dated in 1996, I scream and

know deep down inside that pulling my fingernails out wouldn't be as torturous as having to remain there a minute longer.

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