

Top Tips 3 | Website design advice

This article provides some design tips to give your site the ‘wow’ factor and to keep the viewer from drifting off somewhere else. When you see a mock-up of a proposal for your site ask yourself if it satisfies the criteria identified here.

Stick to the basics to make your site sing.

Creating a business website can be a major investment of time or money – usually both. How do you make sure that you get the most out of that investment?

Here are six pieces of essential design advice for making your website work harder for you. They are derived from looking at hundreds of small-business websites and talking to several designers who work with smaller businesses.

1 Cleanliness is next to godliness

Too many small businesses are enamoured with speckled backgrounds, unreadable type fonts and a bewildering gaggle of buttons and animated gizmos running across their websites. Resist the temptation. A simple, clean design will do a better job for you than a site that looks like a flashing slot machine. You don't see the big guys like Amazon or Yahoo using pink marble or shadowy logos for their site backdrop. There is a reason for that. The background can quickly get in the way of the site itself, so the best advice is to keep it simple.

2 Catch them in the first 10 seconds

Your front page needs to be designed to be both a stop sign and a fast, effective messenger. In two to three seconds the person should know exactly what the site is about or what the business does. Determine what image and message you want the customer to “get” in those first few seconds, and design your website's front page with that objective in mind. A short mission statement, or a summary of what your business does can be very helpful.

3 The first page should load FAST

If you want to catch them in the first 10 seconds, your front page had better not take 20 seconds to reveal itself. Test it to be sure! Photographs are usually the culprits when pages load too slowly. Many small businesses scan photos for their websites, but you need to compress photo images so they are small enough to load quickly. You can reduce file size by removing some colour information from your photo and reducing the quality of the image. It's a balancing act to remove enough information so the photo loads quickly but not so much that the image look like an amateur pointillist painting. It is more art than science; a good designer often gets better results than a novice.

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4 A navigation system that a six-year-old can master

Make it extremely easy for people to find their way around your site. On the Web, the system that helps you find your way around a site is known as its navigational elements. The navigation system should be designed so that a young child can master it. Website navigation is easiest to find if it's on the left side of the screen. Since some surfers still turn off graphics, you need to provide text-based navigation, as well. Most sites do this at the bottom of each page.

5 Update your website regularly

Bring people back to your site by providing important or difficult-to-find information. The one caution here is that you must keep information up-to-date. Imagine visiting a restaurant's website where the front page features a special menu for New Year's Eve 1999. If you don't have time to keep it current, avoid time-sensitive information altogether.

Source: <http://www.bcentral.co.uk>

... and consider the viewer.

- 6 Don't tease. Make sure your pages give visitors what they are looking for (information, product pictures, prices, trade gossip, links to other sites or whatever else you are promising) without making them wait too long or plough through too much other material.
- 7 Do not put too much text on a single page. How much 'too much' is will depend on the purpose and style of your site. But it will always be less than you expect
- 8 Take advantage of print media techniques, such as headlines, captions and display quotes, to guide people to the key points in your text.
- 9 Use pictures, especially if you have suitable photographs with people in them. On the web, as in magazines and newspapers, nothing draws the eye like the human face.
- 10 Be sensitive about your target audience and the hardware and software people are likely to be using. If you are selling high-tech equipment, you can assume it is safe to use the full armoury of technical gimmicks. If you are selling compost, stick to the basics.
- 11 Be wary of using moving elements in your designs. It is true that they catch the eye at first. They also wink and blink and twirl and irritate long after they have served this purpose, and almost guarantee no-one will stay long on your page.
- 12 Provide plenty of navigation aids. This can include menus, text links, 'forward', 'back' and 'home page' buttons, click-through graphics and any number of other variations.

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13 If your site carries advice, price lists, timetables or other information that people will want to download and print out for future reference, bear this in mind. Make sure the colours you choose will print out legibly (and without wasting toner or ink on acres of black or grey space) on ordinary laser or inkjet printers.

Source: <http://www.businesslink.org>

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