

Home / Developer Center / Dreamweaver Developer Center /

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Usability: The key to good website design

Creating a page with Macromedia Dreamweaver MX is easy. Creating a site is easy. Everyone has access to tools that make authoring HTML pages easy. The trick is no longer getting the page built. It's getting it built right, and then getting it looked at—again and again.

You'll find a lot of advice already exists on the web about graphics and layout design to help you get your page looked at. But to get your site looked at again and again (as in actually "used") means your site needs to look good and be, well, usable. It's a little harder to find good advice about the convergence of design and usability, which I think is the most important angle to site design. Let me share with you what I consider to be some of the top design-usability tips.

(By the way, a lot of these tips have appeared on other lists put together by design/usability pundits that I admire. If I have restated one of their tips, I've credited them. At the end of the article, you'll find a [list of my favorite pundit resources](#), so you can explore their good advice yourself.)

Get to know your audience and design for them—not for yourself or your colleagues

You are a professional. You work with design every day; you work on the web every day. Your colleagues probably do the same. You read the source code on the pages you browse to figure out how the authors of those pages did things and to see if the page authors wrote their own JavaScript. You are part of the technology elite.

But, guess what. People who visit the web pages that you create are NOT part of that elite. They are probably so much less knowledgeable of the technologies that you are working with that it is easy for you to forget how removed they are. Most of the people who visit your web pages are people like my mother—both in terms of the number of browsers that they are familiar with and in terms of the dollars that they have available to spend online. Remember that they get new browsers when they upgrade computers—not when one company or another decides to release an update. The people who visit your web pages know may nothing about plug-ins or Java or anything other than "www." In fact, they may not even what "www" means.

If the majority of the people who are going to be buying your client's products are like my mother, then you had better reconcile yourself to the fact that they are the customers you need to please.

There are a variety of ways you can get to know your audience. One way is to use surveys. You or your client can also pay for demographic information about your market.

Perhaps the best way to get to know your audience is to get to know your audience—firsthand. If you are selling bricks and mortar on your website, then spend a morning in the parking lot of a bricks and mortar store. Watch the store's customers as they go in and out of the store. See what they are buying. Do the same to see the customers of a service-oriented business. Sit in the lobby of a doctor's office or in a building with lawyers in it. Whatever the business, get to know the customers.

Here are some demographic considerations to take into account when identifying your target audience:

- If you see that your customers are all middle aged or older, think about type size. Make sure your text isn't too small or difficult to read.
- If you have a primarily male audience, you have to think about color-blindness. If you are working with women, you don't have this concern.
- If your audience is younger, maybe you should have less text and more graphics (including Flash content).
- If your audience is likely to spend money easily, put a special offer on the front page of the site. If they are the thrifty sort,

make the special offer a reduced-price special offer.

Even after you've considered the demographics and propensities of your likely audience, put yourself in the shoes of the business store clerk. Consider, for instance: where you would put the "on sale" items? If you open your eyes and get out of your technology-elite perspective, you might find out something about your audience and it just might surprise you.

How about an example of good design and great usability? One site I like is Joann.com, which is a chain of fabric stores. They have large type, easy navigation, and lots of specials. When I go into the physical store, the customers are predominately women who are 30 years old or older. Many of them shop there to make things for their kids and grandkids. Not that many of the customers are likely to be computer literate. That's my impression, at least, derived from talking to people while waiting in line. What I'm particularly impressed with is the way the Joann.com website has loads of specials and features that tie in perfectly with their physical stores. The customers in line at the checkout stand talk about the website and how they check it weekly to see what is on sale.

Test your site with inexperienced web users

Never overestimate the lowest level of users who visit your site. Usability testing is one of the most important things you can do when rolling out a new website. When you have your site mocked up, test the design and the flow of your navigation with someone who knows nothing about the web. Don't look in your own circles. Reach out. Ask one of the coffee-servers at Starbucks. Check with your mom. Ask a local librarian. Check with the receptionist where you work. Not all of these people are going to be representative of your website's anticipated clients, but they will look at your site with a set of eyes that are a lot fresher than yours.

Do not discount anything these not-so-web-savvy users say or do. Don't just rely on them to tell you what was wrong—be there when they access the site for the first time and watch them as they browse around. Watch, especially, where they hesitate. See what they look at. Listen to them talk to themselves. In fact, urge them to talk out loud while you watch. The feedback they offer as they natter along is very useful.

Specifically focus on whether they identify with your basic navigation of the site. For instance, let's assume you have a clothing site and your navigation has an initial split between men's and women's clothes. Pay attention to whether this division makes sense to your first-time users. If you observe them looking for trousers or blouses or shoes before they make the men/women split, then you have made their experience one click more frustrating than it needs to be.

Test early and test often. Fixing things at the beginning of the design process will be five to ten times less time-consuming than redesigning a website after production.

Make the content on your first page rich and explanatory

The first page of your site should provide as much of what the user is looking for on your site as you can show. (This is one of [Jakob Nielsen's](#) current points.) Don't show a company graphic all by itself or an animated logo spinning around. What does your user care about that? Your user comes to the site to get information, right? So, give it to them.

On your first page, consider doing the following:

- Create a very simple, easy-to-understand navigation system that doesn't take up too much space.
- Make sure your user has a way to search the site. (More on that later.)
- Make the title of the page explanatory. If your user bookmarks the site (and you really want them to do this so they come back often), the first 20 or so characters on the page is what they will see in their favorites/bookmarks menus. If you are the San Francisco branch of the Music Store, entitle the page "Music Store - SF," not "Your one stop shop for music past and present."
- At the top of the first page, add a one sentence tag line that summarizes what the user will find in the site. This is not the mission statement of the company. It is informative, short and sweet.
- Add the first paragraph of the latest news story on the company. Odds are that some of the site visitors are coming to your site because they heard about a piece of news. Make a link from this first paragraph to the section where the company news would be kept.
- Place titles and a synopsis with links to the full text for each article that you think people want to read.
- Provide a way of contacting the company on the first page. Often, people come to the website just to get a phone number. In fact, put the main phone number on each page.
- Provide a way of contacting the company on the first page. Often, people come to the website just to get a phone number. In fact, put the main phone number on each page.
- If you have a physical presence other than your website, provide a store address or locator on the front page. Or, put a link to either a store locator or a listing of all the stores that people can search or sort through.
- If you are selling directly from the web page (or if you have an advertising circular), put some of the profiled products on

the front page. Don't just leave a link for specials.

- If you are selling a service, highlight some of those services on the front page rather than making your user dig for them.

Check out the [Wolf Camera site](#) for an outstanding example of most of these points.

Archive content after redesigning or changing a site

The need for archiving is another one of [Jacob Nielsen's](#) excellent tips. When users come to your site, they see the things you present them. If you do a good job and you present what site visitors are looking for, they may bookmark the page, tell their friends about the site, or use that information in some way. If you update your site and change the content on the front page, the next time they come back, they are not going to find what they were looking for. However, if you provide a section of archived content (or a link to an archived content page) people will find that content easier.

In short, keep an archive and make sure that people can find links to the archive from the places they would be looking for the original information.

Include useful search terms in meta tags and titles

Meta tags help with indexing and searching your site. There are two meta tags that you certainly should be using: description and keywords.

Description is a short description of the site. Again, this needs to be explanatory and it is not a marketing message. When this comes up in a search engine, it is your chance to tell the potential visitor what your site has to offer, not how great you are.

Keywords are words that are offered to search engines to help them display your page to people who are searching the web. If you load those meta tags with information that is too granular or too general or too obscure, people are not going to find the page. Or, they will be overwhelmed with pages that only partially match what they are looking for. Try asking a dozen people who are both familiar and unfamiliar with the site. When you tell them what your site has on it, ask them to think out loud and free associate words and phrases. This is a good basis for the meta tags on your pages.

Here's an example of some meta tags that might not help much. If you are an auto body shop in San Jose, California, your meta tags could look like:

body, shop, San Jose, California, car, bondo, repair

Now, these keywords might seem logical, but the problem is that they would cause you to get as many hits from people looking for porn as you would get for people looking for body shops.

These keywords would be more specific and better situated for your client:

auto body-shop, body shop, body shop San Jose, auto repair

Use the right keywords and think about how people will search for you.

Provide contact and copyright information on every page

Put your contact information on every page. How many times have you used the web like a big phone directory? I do it all the time and I know that a lot of other people do too. If you are setup to talk directly to customers, make sure you are making it easy for them to contact you.

There's another reason you might want to provide contact information on every page. Sometimes people "deep link" to pages existing in the lower navigational levels in your website. You may not like the practice, but you can't really do too much to stop them. However, you can make sure that your copyright and contact information are on each page. This way, no matter how someone gets to your page, they can contact you.

Set up your navigation system to help users find what they are looking for

Some sort of navigation system is, obviously, essential to your site. Sometimes it's comprised of fancy JavaScript rollovers. Sometimes it's made up of Flash files. Sometimes it's just a series of text links separated with a colon (":") character or two. What is not so obvious is that whichever technology you use to build the navigation system won't be worth squat if people can't: a) find it or b) figure it out.

There is something to be said for the web convention for text links. They are in text, they are blue, and they have an underline. Even people who know virtually nothing about the web usually know this. If you deviate from this convention for any reason, you are going to have to somehow train the user to click the right elements to get somewhere. Perhaps what to click in the navigation system will be obvious, or perhaps you'll have to spend time informing your visitors about the convention you're using for links. In either case, it is a usability cost: small in the former case and huge in the latter.

If you decide that your navigation and links need to differ visually from than the standards, take time early on to test the interface. Test it with people who don't know a thing about your site or the products you have on it.

One good resource for learning about navigation is [Information Architecture for the World Wide Web](#) from O'Reilly. The authors are librarians and they go into great detail about navigation techniques. They even spend a good amount of time talking about which part of speech to use to make your navigation consistent and logical.

Provide search options

Navigation from the user interface (UI) is only one way people traverse a site. The other major way of navigating (other than just randomly browsing) is to search the site. Search engines are very complex these days. They allow a multitude of options and the cost ranges from free services to very expensive. You can even buy Google's search engine technology for your site search engine. If you use Macromedia ColdFusion MX, you already have access to the [Verity search engine](#).

You need to think about which engine you want to use and factor that into the cost of building the site. But, whatever the cost, you *do* want a search engine. How often have you been to a site looking for a Marvin the Martian doll and not been able to decide if it was under "Stuffed Animals" or "Movie Characters"?

You'll get both kinds of users--those who search for something on a site and those who look through a hierarchy of topics for expected categories. Make them both happy.

Maintain consistency of design

Don't let a site grow organically over time and develop sections that have features and conventions that are not applied to the rest of the site. This is a common problem. Websites start small, mostly. They grow and new features and conventions are added to help the user. But over time, these additions constitute a whole new way to navigate and interact with the site. If you have to work on one section at a time, then at least keep a list of the new conventions that you are adding. Then, as time allows add them to the pages you authored previously.

Better yet, work with your team to collect all the new features and agree on them as a team. Then, apply them to all the sections of your site at the same time that you roll out the new sections.

Think about noise, movement, or anything that spins twice ... no, wait ... three times

Yes, I work for Macromedia and I do think Macromedia Flash MX is cool. However, anything that doesn't contribute directly to the understanding of the site or doesn't impart information should be thought about long and hard. If your user thinks she has to wait for unimportant stuff to download to use your site, she is going to lose patience and leave.

The worst offender here is the large introduction. Give the user information and not fluff. You should never even be in the situation where you should contemplate a "skip intro" button.

On the other hand, if you use Macromedia Flash MX to create a useful movie describing how to use a product, to illustrate a technique, or to present dynamic data in a rich Internet application, then you're on the right track. There are some excellent examples of how to create Macromedia Flash MX content that improve a site dramatically. Check out the [Pet Market application](#) to see an excellent use of Macromedia Flash MX.

The same caution goes for music, whistles, and beeps. No one except designers and children really like things that pop and whir and sputter when you click on them. They are a waste of time for you to set up, they play unreliably across browsers and platforms, and they don't really impart information. If you are doing an audio tour on-line or teaching a language, that is a different matter. But for decoration, avoid sound.

Proofread the text on your sites

Simply put, misspellings and incorrect grammar turn off your users. They cause your site to look as though someone rushed it into production or make you look like you don't care enough to do the job right. (I am a product of Benedictine education and they certainly drummed that one in.)

Provide printer-friendly pages

Web pages are great ways to get information out to an almost unlimited number of people. If your information is really so good and useful, it is likely users will want to have it available even when they are not at the computer. For years we have had it pounded into our heads that the web requires us to break information down into small-sized, readable chunks (which is true). But, now we need to drum it back in our heads that the big, long, easily-printed page has its place, too.

If you have information that users may want to print, think about setting up a PDF file (which opens from a link). This usually makes the printing process so much easier. At the least, you can take the same content that has been spread out over the smaller, linked pages and put all of it into one large document. Then, give the users a link to that consolidated document so they don't have to print out multiple pages.

A great example is [Webmonkey](#). Look for the print icon and text link at the top left of the page. Click on the print icon and see how it works.

Enhance your pages—don't replace them

Jacqueline Hamilton is a new name to me. I have a link to her site in the resources section below and it is worth a look. This is her advice:

Enhance your pages, don't replace them. As people visit your sites, they develop patterns in what they look for and where they go. They bookmark the places that they like, not the pages you think they should link to. If you remove the pages on the URL, then you break the link the customer may have to you.

If you do have to do a major site redesign, try to make links that go to the same sections as the previous links would have. If there are major changes, at least add a redirect from the old pages to the new pages. That way, if someone has an old URL, they won't get a broken link page when they come back to your site.

Resources

Now visit the websites of some of my favorite design and usability pundits:

- [Vincent Flanders](#)
- [Robin Williams](#)
- [Jacob Nielsen](#)
- [Jacqueline Hamilton](#) (Be sure to check out the links on [this page](#).)

About the author

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