



**The City of Edmonton
Budget-in-Brief
(1998)**

First before delving into what we believe to be good web design factors, we should make it clear that since web sites serve many different purposes, there is no one "correct" way to design a web site. Some sites, such as hobby or personal sites have a lot more leeway in what is acceptable practice compared to commercial or professional sites. Since Sabre Software & Consulting Ltd. primarily deals with business and professional web site clients our focus will be on elements relating primarily to these types of sites.

Even for a corporate or professional client a web site may serve multiple purposes, or these organizations may have more than one web site to serve these disparate needs. Examples of these different purposes include investor information, service and/or product information, direct on-line sales, customer/technical support, competitions/special events, general corporate marketing, and even retailer, distributor, franchisee or employee support (through password protected access).

One important component not directly related to the web site design is the selection of a domain name. This should ideally be selected in such a way that it can be easily discerned and remembered by users (not always possible because of availability issues), but since it is as important an address as a street address or phone number, constantly changing this address is one sure way to lose users who may think that you have gone out of business if a once familiar address suddenly disappears with the "Domain Not Found" error message. Even if you do a major site redesign and re-architecting it is a good idea to put automatic forwarding on obsolete page addresses (at least the popular ones) so that people don't receive the disturbing "Error 404 - Page Not Found" message.

It has been said that a web site needs to be more than an electronic brochure/catalogue, but for some companies, such as service type organizations/professionals, an on-line brochure is a very valid purpose for a web site, whether it be the focus of the web site, a single menu item or just a downloadable Acrobat (pdf) document. On-line is a cost effective way to distribute a brochure/catalogue, both from a production and distribution perspective. And updates are cheaper and faster to execute and disseminate than with hard copy. Just imagine this nightmare scenario: You have just received shipment of 10,000 copies of a printed catalogue, and receive word that company XYZ Inc. has just declared bankruptcy and immediately stopped shipment of their Super Widget, which just happened to be the feature item in that catalogue. Solution, add a stick-on label over the key item, or hit the recycle bin with all 10,000 copies. For an on-line catalogue, just rework the pdf file or web page. Cost, time and blood pressure - considerably lower.

This is not to say that no one should ever print up a glossy brochure ever again, but it does point up how an on-line electronic version can be both cost-effective and timely.

In the following sections we will discuss key features/concepts that we feel are important components of web site design.

Corporate Image

Your web site is as much a part of your corporate image as any other medium of exposure, such as brochures, business cards, letterhead, TV and print advertising, logos, signs, and any other method that you use to let people know who you are. Additionally, since virtually anybody, anywhere can potentially access your site, a bad site could do far more damage than pretty much any one of the other media mentioned above.

Therefore a site must be designed to project the image that you want your organization to have. Some small business people use their teenage kid to design their site because he is a wiz with computers, and cheap. Unfortunately this often results in a clone of little "Jimmy's" favourite rock band fan site, bearing little resemblance to the corporate style, and quite possibly a scattered

organization guaranteed to confuse customers.

One of the first things that we at Sabre Software & Consulting Ltd. try to do is establish a look and feel for a site that the client is happy with and that is consistent with their corporate image.

Site Architecture and Navigation

It is important that a site have a consistent look and feel, and that each page reflects the organization that it belongs to. Some sites have a quite fancy and appealing home page, but then interior content pages have a generic, belongs to no one look. Since search engines can catalogue these pages individually, people arriving at one of these pages directly may have no idea that they are at a particular organization's site.

The navigation structure of a site is important. Information needs to be laid out in a logical fashion. Key features need to be easily located by the user without having to try and second-guess the designer's thought processes. This can be tricky at times because a site with room to grow in features needs to anticipate the extra site elements without looking incomplete. At the same time an unnecessarily restrictive layout may make future additions look ad hoc, and can eventually result in a totally non functional site.

A key component to a good site design is a (working) site map showing where key elements of the site are going to be located, and how the navigation structure will support them. Even the best laid plans can run into trouble, but a navigation concept that is flexible and designed to anticipate future needs, even if these needs are poorly defined right now, is much easier to adapt in the future than a rigid structure with no scope for change. The advent of drop menus in browsers has greatly helped the versatility of site design, but even well designed framed sites, or hierarchical structures work well and can be quite flexible to deal with future needs.

If a site gets very large and complex, then an active on-site site map can be a good idea. Another approach is a search capability, although this may require a database which can add cost and complexity to a site.

But the key, regardless of which navigation method is selected is to organize the material in a logical way so that users can find what they want with the minimum of effort.

Content and Clarity

One of the many purposes of web sites is to communicate information on products/services or technical support issues. This information should be clear and concise. If a user is looking for information on your products 'A' and 'B', the information presented should be sufficient that they can make a decision as to whether they should buy 'A' over 'B', or indeed even over perhaps a competitor's product 'C'. Nothing is more frustrating than coming to a site and getting little or no, or worse yet, confusing, information on a product or service. Some users may never buy anything over the net, but good information may still net a sale through your retail distribution chain.

While direct communication with your clients/customers and potential future ones may be good, forcing a user to contact you for even the simplest of information may well lose them right away. Communication should be reserved for special needs, and when the buyer is close to making a decision and needing some additional information to aid in the final decision.

A little extra effort to educate the customer/client base may seem like you are also helping your competition, but if you have a compelling product/service, that additional information may just tip the buyer's decision in your favour in lieu of an equally compelling competing product.

And favour truth and facts over hype. Most consumers of products and services are becoming pretty jaded these days. Over hyping

something can actually lose a sale, not make it. Also misinformation can get you into trouble with legal authorities, even in far off lands that you may not even intend to business in.

Promises, Promises, Promises

This is a catch all for four, although different topics, all of which have a similar effect in disappointing the end user.

The illogical link. This is when a user follows a link and does not end up where they expect to get. News portal sites are bad for this. Click a headline expecting to get to an article on a topic only to arrive at another portal style page with dozens of links, and often the continuation link for this topic being worded differently. Frustrating. Does not encourage repeat visits to your site.

The not quite there link. Similar to the illogical link in some ways. Click a download link for a file. The next step might be a terms and conditions page. The next link might lead to a selection of servers (i.e. find one closest to you). Then the next link might be to select your computer platform or system software version. The next link might be download and installation steps. Then finally you might actually get to download the file. While sometimes some of these steps might be desirable or necessary, the more streamlined that this process can be the better.

The Feature-of-the-Month. Having a feature that is updated periodically can be a good idea; if it is updated regularly. Having a album of the month feature that was last updated on October two years ago actually does more damage than good. Don't make promises that you can't keep.

The contact us and we will get back to you promise. Nothing does your organization more harm than this promise not fulfilled. If you aren't able or willing to respond promptly, don't make this offer. Have no email links on your site if this service cannot be supported. But better still just support it. Its the best way to develop a dialogue with your customers/clients.

Integration

The language used for most web sites is HTML, **Hyper Text Markup Language**. Basically hyper text refers to the ability to link to other parts of the web with clickable text links. Image maps, clickable buttons, etc. are all extensions of this capability. The beauty of this is that you can make all sorts of reference links to related topics/pages, either as asides (external or internal to your site), or as main leads to subsections of your site.

A good example of this is the MacPhee Workshop site where items like patterns, fabrics, kits and retreats that are discussed in the TV show episode descriptions have direct links to the relevant catalogue page to facilitate ordering that item. And the catalogue page has a back button to take you back to the same TV show episode. The same linking applies to the newsletters, brainwaves and course descriptions on that site.

This integration of the site makes it easier for the user. They don't have to follow the links if they don't want to, but it is also much easier to order pattern #203, than if they had to write it down, and then search the catalogue later.

Generally Sabre Software & Consulting Ltd. suggests that links to external sites be in new windows, and in that way you don't lose the user from your site.

There are many other aspects of web site design that we could discuss, but for now we will end our philosophical discussion. If you have any questions, or feel that philosophically we are in tune with your web development needs, please feel free to contact us at: andy@sabresoft.com