PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

Arguably the most important element of any website is its design. Design, in the context of the Marketplace, may be defined as: (1) the organization of the textual elements ("copy") on your pages (i.e. broken into paragraphs, double spaced, "blocked", etc.); (2) the number and quality of images in use on your pages; and (3) the significance of the information you wish to present (your "value-add") and its role in your overall site design.

THE FRONT PAGE

The front page of your website is very much like the front page of a newspaper: information presented must be important, intuitive, and concise.

- Consider the top 4 or 5 items which comprise your store's "value-add": what are you selling, and why should customers purchase from you?

- The most important information about your store should be at the top. Users generally do not want to have to scroll through a page in order to find the information they seek.

- Be aware of how your readers' eyes are moving: left to right. Information that is placed in the upper left corner of the page is most likely to be seen first, and is therefore crucial in the selling process.

- In general, use images sparingly. Those used should be fairly small (less than 40K) and have relevance to the information being presented. (Note: Adobe Photoshop or Illustrator, Macromedia FreeHand or Fireworks will all allow you to create high quality, web-ready images.)

- Break your text up into 7-9 line "blocks" if you have a lot of information. Blocking text helps the reader's eyes rest on what's important.

SUBSEQUENT PAGES

Subsequent pages in your store may include category pages, product descriptions, product names, and so forth. These pages, while not as apparent as your front page, are subject to the same guidelines. Importance, intuitiveness, and conciseness should be key elements throughout your website.

DESIGN TIPS

- Choose colors that compliment the products and or services you are selling. Avoid using neon or other "loud" tones; choose colors which blend well with or match pre-existing colors on the page.

- Keep your pages as simple and uncluttered as possible.

- Write down your "value-add" list and keep it handy -- this will help you keep your website's main purpose in mind.
PRINCIPLES OF USABILITY

Making your website more usable will, in theory, make it more accessible to a broader audience. Usability also aids in creating a pleasant customer experience: arrive, find good, and purchase good as quickly and efficiently as possible. It is your job to make that journey as smooth as possible.

- Choose text colors which are easy to read. An HTML font size of +1 or greater is a generally-accepted standard for readability.
- The larger the type, the easier it is to read. Choose type that is large enough to read, but does not detract from the aesthetic of your store.
- Avoid very long lines of text (greater than 12-13 words) in order to improve readability.
- When using text "blocking," leave a small (3-5 pixels) border all around the block. Text that is blocked is easier to read, and more readily understood.

DESIGNING (OR REDESIGNING) YOUR WEBSITE

According to Kristoffer Bohmann, a noted German Web designer, user tasks are a critical element of Web page design. Bohmann notes that: (1) Users are goal-oriented and focus their attention on content of relevance to the task; and (2) Users regard low-relevance content as distracting or disturbing.

CASE STUDY 1: ASYNC.CC

Async Associates, a server technology provider and training company, opened its previous website in the late 1990s. Site content was grouped tightly together, making visual distinctions difficult. The menu of Async's services and contact information, an important aspect of the page, was placed at one edge of the page. Items on a page that are close to the edge of the page or obscured by larger objects, such as the large images below the menu, tend to be much less accessible in a user's mind.

Async's redesigned website incorporates many elements of effective design. The company's options menu has been repositioned in a place of prominence, allowing easy access to site visitors. Images and text incorporate border white space, giving the site "breathing room."
CASE STUDY 2: MEDECO.COM

Medeco, Inc.'s original website was lacking in its design, though not due to clutter or poor organization; the website was simply lacking content. Medeco's old website presented several problems to many users in many situations: Images take time to load, are subject to errors (as the image illustrates), and are generally difficult to access in large numbers. The redesigned website at right is, while a definite improvement, still not top-notch. A certain amount of white (or some other color) space in a webpage is accepted and encouraged; a veritable canyon between left and right creates unbalance in a design.

SUMMARY OF CASE STUDIES

Certain elements of each case study warrant further thought. In the design arena:

- Allow some space to "live in" your page. A certain amount of space, whatever the color, allows users the freedom to move around in your space and get comfortable. Remember, you don't want to box them into a corner.
- Avoid using too many or large images on your page. Unless the image is vitally important to your value-add, focus a user's attention on what matters most. Keep peripheral images small and non-central.
- Try to avoid placing elements against or very near the edge of your page. Again, allow users some breathing room, free of the sense that using your menu will make the mouse fall off the screen.
- Remember your value-add: What are the most important aspects of your business? Summarize them and have them in mind while designing every page.

NOTRE DAME RESOURCES: YOUR ON-CAMPUS HELP

A number of Notre Dame resources exist to aid your Web quest. Should you have any questions about your website’s usability, design, or both, contact these groups first.

Dome Designs: Dome Designs is a student-run web design group. They specialize in many aspects of website design.

Office of Web Administration - Design Guidelines: The Office of Web Administration offers numerous design tips and tutorials on its website. Included are a few of their guidelines for designing a website.

Marketing 461’s List of Web Design Links: Professor Robert Drevs of the Mendoza College of Business has compiled a comprehensive list of web design resources.

EXTERNAL RESOURCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY