Web Design for Maximum Performance

The days of debating the need for a website are over. Every company expecting to be competitive in today's hectic business world needs a website. The options are only with regard to the type of website you have - with e-commerce capabilities or without, with sign in for information or without, with direct contact to key executives or a more general contact us, and so on. These are all tactical issues that should be determined as part of your overall web strategy, which should be developed and designed in order to maximize the performance of your website. The web strategy should be part of your overall marketing strategy, as your website is one of the tools customers and potential customers will be accessing in order to learn more about your company and your products.

This article is intended to give you some of the basics in web design so that you are aware of the fundamentals as you plan your web strategy. Here are some hints:

- Plan Your Site Out -think of the process as building a physical object, with all the corresponding sketches and planning. The architecture of your site is critical. If people can't find what they are looking for the purpose of your site has essentially been neutralized. Know how all your pages will interact, what the navigational routes are and how you will maintain graphic consistency.

- Introduce and Welcome - welcome people to your website and use your homepage or "About Us" to briefly introduce yourself. Use a few lines to explain who you are and what you offer. Don't expect people to be willing to browse your site to find out the basics.

- Get Naked - Some technology companies keep their websites intentionally vague because they do not want competitors gaining information about their company. This is nonsense. The marketing and sales process demands exposure. The damage a competitor may be able to inflict by the bits of information gathered from your website is offset by far by the sales generated by having clear and detailed information on your website for your customers and potential customers to view. This does not mean you publish secrets. Customers don't need to know your secrets. It does mean you publish what you do, how you do it (in general), and why it is compelling to your customers.

- Design from 3 Perspectives - When you design the website think not only graphically, but also in terms of function and the purpose of the content (what the user will be doing with the content). Then integrate the three.

- Keep it Quick - Most of the time keeping it quick means keeping it simple, but if you can find the way to make it more engaging graphically while keeping it quick then that's a good thing. Remember, people on the net are impatient. So get them where they're going quickly.

- Don't Put Up a Site Map - While some experts like site maps, Tudog doesn't. We don't think anyone is coming to your site to see how it works. If they go to the map it's because they can't figure out how to find something they're looking for. If that's the case, you don't need a map. What you do need is to re-evaluate your

site's architecture and redo the navigational links so that the content on your site is more readily accessible.

- Don't Blink - one way many companies are trying to draw attention to certain content elements on their websites is by using blinking text. While this may give a Las Vegas like feel to your website (is that what you want?), it may also distract and annoy your visitors. Personally, as a design element, we don't recommend it.

- Color Me Light - using dark backgrounds often make a website hard to read and add little to the site. Depending on your targeted audience, you're probably best off sticking to white or light backgrounds and dark text.

- Don't Count on It - it is fascinating that some sites feature visitor counters. First of all, your visitors are coming to use your site, not, in most cases, to see how many other people have. More importantly, unless your pulling in a few million hits a day, you have no idea if the number on the counter is impressing people or scaring them away. Simple solution is to not put a counter on your site.

- Don't Go Font Crazy - while a certain font may look great on your computer, you have no way of knowing how it will look on the user's computer, or even if the user has the same font. While HTML allows you to specify a preferred font and some alternatives (<fontface>), you probably want to stick to the basics and use fonts that are most common.

- Use Thumbnails - If you can't use small images then you should use thumbnails for your large ones, giving people the opportunity to see the image before deciding if they want to go through the lengthy downloading process.

- Don't Force Registration - it is understandable that you have an interest in knowing who is viewing your site and what information they seek. Still, it is bad policy to required registration before giving out the information. It is almost as if you are telling the customer that there is a condition or price to be paid before you do them the favor of exposing them to your company's sales pitch. Some people will leave your site just on principle. Others will leave because they don't want to fill out the form. In other words, let them into your site, get them acquainted and fond of you and then ask them (nicely) to let you know a bit about who they are. If they are interested in your product they'll gladly give you their information. If they are not, what good is having their information?

- Check for Errors - make sure your site doesn't have any spelling errors, pricing errors or dead links. These sort of mistakes make users wary because they see lack of attention to detail as a sign that you are less than professional. And since so much of web based activity is based on the credibility you establish through your website, it is important that you don't have silly mistakes getting in your way.

- Forget Grammar - writing for the web requires that you be quick and to the point, personal and friendly and, when appropriate, somewhat entertaining. To achieve these you are excused from the normal rules of grammar. This does not mean your language doesn't have to flow properly and be cohesive and correct. It just means that if you use fragmented sentences and the like, you'll be forgiven.

- Check your Links - if you have links to other websites, make sure they are operational and bring the user to the right place. You should continue checking this on a regular basis just to be sure.

- Wait Until You're Done - if your site isn't completed, don't announce that it's up on the web. All good sites are in a perpetual state of being under construction. Still, it's best to wait to announce your site until you have your first version completed. This allows users to understand your purpose and potential.

The web can be a powerful and versatile weapon in your marketing arsenal. Just as easily it can be a boomerang that causes damage because the website wasn't given the attention and development time necessary for it to maximize its potential. Tudog strongly encourages our clients to integrate their web strategy into their overall marketing plans, so that the website becomes a powerful feature in the company's communications kit.