



10 Website Design Traps...You Should Avoid

Do You Love or Hate Your Website Design...or Even Care?

Virtually all businesses fall into four categories when it comes to websites – and their respective design:

A) They hate the “look” of their website, and believe that their lousy design is the most important thing impairing their ability to be successful online: “If only we had a different, better, cooler, more modern, awesome-looking website, we would have arrived, and more business would roll in.” They rant about their own site, try not to look at it themselves, don’t encourage anyone else to either...and do little else.

B) They are overly enamored with their current website aesthetics in spite of the fact that the site does little in [generating prospects and/or sales](#). “We love our really sharp, elegant, super good-looking site that everyone we talk to raves about - We’re there, Baby! (in Dicky V lingo).” Plus these folks often assume, incorrectly, that if their great looking site can’t bring business in...well, that’s just the way it is...and they’ve done what they can do online.

C) They just don’t care much about their site or how it looks that much one way or the other: “We’ve got a website, and that’s enough.”

D) They are serious online players who like their website design and the results it generates (whether it’s a B2B, B2C, e-commerce or non-ecommerce site). But, frankly, are never quite satisfied and are continuously tinkering with things to improve their design and overall site – for the purpose of creating more business. “We like our site, but we can always make it better.”

Category D types are a small minority who “get it.” The other three categories of businesses need to get a life, especially now in the tough economy that is breeding turmoil but also tremendous new opportunities to fill the gaps left by other businesses falling by the wayside, online and offline.

Design + Content

Admittedly, I reside on the far end of the “[Website Content Trumps Website Design Every Time](#)” end of the web development spectrum. [Web design](#) can be really important, though, IF it enhances the customer experience online and IF it genuinely works in tandem with your content to help you market your products and services.



You can try BUT...you cannot ever make your online messages and information clear enough, your offers enticing enough, your site visible enough, or your site easy enough to use for your visitors. Those are all high bars to continue to shoot for over time. All sites are works in progress...or should be. Probably the major fault of a majority of business sites is that they are virtually static (except e.g. for a new press release or whatever every few months). I love really great web design that helps you reach those high bars, but unfortunately too many design firms and unwitting customers are more interested in design for its own sake, or to pump up (business owners') egos, or win design awards, or to look like they are cool among their own piers.

Effective website design boils down to three things (easier said than done):

- Is your site super-easy to use?
- Is your site super-easy to read?
- Is your site pleasing to the eye, aesthetically?

How does yours stack up? If you're not too thrilled, maybe you've fallen into one of many Website Design Traps.

Debunking Some Common Website Design Practices

If you really need an online "facelift" (and it's is not a bad idea every 2-3 years to shake things up, regardless of your online success), or need the ability to deliver more and better content online, or perhaps have that growing, gnawing feeling that your design (as cool as it may seem to you and your cronies) just isn't cutting it, here are a few common design traps to NOT fall into. By avoiding these traps, there are still a zillion good ways – and no right "one" – to design your next website to get a look and results you want. These Traps are viewed from my vantage point as a non-designer...but still a professional [who helps develop and market sites for a living](#).

And BTW, although I preach many of these Traps, etc...to my clients (and designer partners), I do not win battles on all of them. Actually, though, most are pretty consistent with Best-of-Practice design recommendations from top design experts (who, unfortunately, seem to be ignored by the vast majority of designers and their duped clients):

10 Website Design Traps...to Avoid Like the Plague (if you can)

Design Trap # 1: These days images trump words on any decent site. (AKA the relatively new "tyranny of images versus html words"). This is a corollary of the ancient saying



that “A picture is worth a 1000 words,” Well, maybe sometimes, if it’s a really good picture, indeed that can be true. Otherwise, give me some words (a lot less than 1000), too, on any given website page.

This is a biggie. First of all, images (photos, illustrations, Flash and other movies, etc) are all really good things...in their place on websites...and give the Web incredible power and richness over other marketing vehicles. In fact, here are couple Flash movies I helped concept and develop with Little Planet *nine years ago*, back in the dot.com heyday...[check them out \(click on the movie on the left... which is still pretty entertaining\)](#).

But even more today, the mantra is the fewer actual html words, especially on the homepage, the better, and that any words should be located in image or Flash files. Not true or even advisable at this point in time for websites. [Some amount of words](#) on your web pages (in html vs. image-type files) remains very important to BOTH visitors and to search engines.

Note: Google has built 99% of their search algorithms so far to “see” and evaluate keywords on sites that are in html code (vs. images, Flash, etc); even Google continues to wrestle with “seeing” search term words in various Flash or other image files, and it’s an evolving, complicated area now, but they are not there yet).

Words (in html) are critical for telling your quick USP (Unique Selling Proposition)/differentiation/benefits, making an offer(s), and [enabling search engines to find your pages](#). Short copy is fine on most homepages (versus other pages) – you still need [some crisp, clear words](#).

Various thorny problems typically percolate, though, on sites when, e.g.:

- Your Flash piece or image(s) is just sort of there (mainly because you and/or your designer thinks you need one) and adds little to your key message or actions step(s). Especially when it automatically “plays” on your homepage (in particular) it becomes a major distraction than anything else (assuming you have other valuable content on your page).
- Even if it looks good and incorporates a decent message, too often the Flash piece is much too large (crowding out everything else), or runs too long (for anyone to pay attention to or have the patience to review), or the frames move too fast...and if the thing keeps looping without stopping – all this boggles most eyes and minds – even if viewers are pretty sophisticated, online.
- Or worse, there are multiple Flash pieces plus other images cluttering the page – further confusing your visitors.

I cannot tell you the number of prospects whom I talk to who say they want to do a new site so that they can get “some Flash” on their homepage, or they want or a complete Flash site. Of



course, designers love this stuff...even if it has no positive business impact...and too often give customers what they want, but don't need. You can find your own balance of images and words, but html words are central to virtually all successful business sites...and can still be complemented with images of all sorts.

Design Trap #2: Auto-sound on the homepage or any page grabs them (e.g., a video, Flash, or audio clip that plays sound automatically by simply hitting the page). Sure, if you sell music or whatever, then maybe OK. Otherwise, let people turn on the sound or video themselves (and you can encourage them to do so). And for goodness sake, make it crystal clear how they can turn it off as well (e.g. with a typical "player"). Auto-sound is way too intrusive for most customer audiences.

Design Trap #3: Dark backgrounds look cool, dramatic and sophisticated.

Sometimes if done incredibly well (here's a good one: [Jaros Guitars](#)) that can be true. But unless e.g. you're in entertainment or a related business (or something really unusual), stay away from the "darkness" if at all possible. Go light. Usually, dark backgrounds are simply that: stark and dark: unfriendly, less approachable for online visitors, and much more difficult to read (with light print) compared to lighter backgrounds with dark fonts.

Design Trap #4: Design for the smallest common monitor resolution (e.g. 800X600 although it is now incredibly rare). Too many designers think "small" looks good, makes a site look "simple," and say they are designing to the lowest common denominator of monitor size. But any more there is no reason not to optimize design for a 1024X768 size monitor (and I think now even larger like 1280X1024 is fine because there are more and more people using larger, higher vs. lower resolution monitors). Yes, sites can be designed to be flexible according to monitor size (but this has some issues). The point being that "small" is not the way to go if you want a site that more visitors can easily read and use.

Design Trap #5: Small and/or unusual fonts are stylish and what everyone else is doing. Hello...? Even the minority of folks blessed with 20-20 vision have trouble reading small fonts in print (actually anything less than 14 pt), and more difficulty on monitors – including larger ones. Use your common sense. You don't have to use a font nearly that large for your main copy, but is your primary font size really reader-friendly on PCs, Macs and multiple browsers...from 3 feet away? Yes, you can design your site to make the font size adjustable by visitors (but few visitors bother to do so or know how to do that). I think that a lot of designers also use tiny fonts to shoehorn in word content into small spaces. It's simply a bad idea. Plus, even more importantly, a lot of fonts simply read better online and do not pixelate on specific browsers – and others simply look horrible. Stick the standard, reasonably sized fonts, versus trying to be different.



Design Trap #6: Always put all information “above-the-fold” for your homepage and other pages (that is so that no scrolling down is required). This Trap is related to your optimal screen resolution as well, but the notion that the every page (including your homepage) must be 100% visible (without any scrolling) is loony. If you want your homepage, in particular, to appear above-the-fold, fine – but it does not have to do so. Absolutely, the essential elements of any page need to be “above-the-fold” on your homepage and other pages. Yes, most people do not like to scroll, excessively, down any one page. Probably more than a half-page or so of scrolling is plenty for a homepage. Extremely detailed sub-pages might go a couple more pages of scrolling, but you’re better off dividing long content into additional pages. It is always better to have more pages on a site than less.

Design Trap #7. A “different” navigation location will make your site stand out.

Your main navigation is maybe the most important common element of your pages. An unusual navigation location like the middle of the page or the bottom or the right side...for the sake of being different...is usually a lousy idea. People (at least in the Western world) read top to bottom/left to right, and that’s where the navigation/sub-navigation needs to be (and what people are used to seeing online). Top-of-page and/or left-side-of-page navigation/sub navigation that is not drop-dead self-explanatory (vs. cute) is the rule. Navigation location is NOT a place to be different.

Design Trap #8. Site links should be (that is, look) subtle and be minimal (in number) so as not to wreck the design. Call me old fashioned here, but you can’t make the links in your copy too obvious. If indeed, you are consistent with the appearance of your links, e.g. using one contrasting font color that when rolled over becomes an underlined link, that’s OK. Still, underlined links are still best. On too many sites, though, designers try to avoid internal links in the copy, even though you really can’t have enough of them. And they make them so subtle that you almost have roll over the copy to realize it’s a link. Nutty, at best.

Design Trap #9. Visitors (should) already know what pages they are on from navigating and the page content. That is, designers think that other aids junk up their pretty designs. I always get aggravated at sites, especially with multiple layers of pages that don’t explicitly indicate for you what page you are on. This can be done e.g. by highlighting the main navigation sub navigation or sub-sub navigation bars and/or in the case of using drop downs – use a top “bread crumb” approach, etc – wherein the specific page and a path back are indicated. Show visitors where they are on your site at all times.

PS. And don’t forget to have your top logo be a roll-over link back to the homepage...and still have a “home” link on all other pages. Do both.



Design Trap #10. We've got SEO (Search Engine Optimization) handled for your site.

Many designers say they are SEO "experts" but about 1 in 10 really are. Because clients typically know so little about the key ingredients of SEO, designers know that they can do a couple quickie things and get away with that...but usually not even close to [key SEO basics](#) that you need. Then clients wonder a couple years later why their site never comes up in any important keyword searches. No surprise there.

Of course, there are other Website Design Traps – but if you avoid most of the ten above, you'll be way ahead of most of your competitors online.

You Can Have Your Cake and Eat it Too, Online!

You can have a highly usable, readable, and great looking site: excellent design that also improves your online marketing results. But if you've got lousy content now, it's just a lipstick-on-the-pig thing with a new "look" that retrofits in some tired, old content– and usually a complete waste of time and money. It's fine to want a new design for your site, but spend your money wisely so that you can generate real business results, too. Or have very low expectations that your site will ever tangibly help your business.

Rarely are marketers very good at designing and building websites or the technology that makes them possible. I'm no exception. On the flip side, rarely are web designers very good at [online marketing](#) which is what really makes a website hum. Typically, designers have graphics and web page construction skills, and these days most have some level of back-end technology expertise (although other web IT expertise is sometimes critical, too for sophisticated sites). Few, though are skilled at the key things needed to create [business results on the Web: the copy and compelling content](#), [search engine marketing \(SEM/SEO\)](#), and [disciplined follow-up](#).

If you don't have the expertise in-house, make sure you hire a quality team that can handle both your [website development](#) AND your [website design](#). And realize that might involve two or three entities. Besides helping with your [website planning](#), [content](#), [SEO/SEM](#), and [online marketing follow-up](#), [Ranseen Marketing often coordinates overall website projects](#) that include designers and sometimes additional technology expertise -- to produce sites aimed at results.

Keep your [website design](#) in perspective, and indeed, you can have your cake and eat it too, online!