



Web Design 101: Essentials You Need to Know When Designing Web & Interactive Content



Cre8 Conference at GOA

American Graphics Institute

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The goals of Web Design

To understand how to create good web design, it is worth taking a step back and trying to define the goals of all design.

The primary goal of good design is to create an experience which makes people's lives easier and is also visually pleasing.

Some examples: A well designed store makes it easy for customers to walk in and find products they are looking for (or in some cases products they never knew they wanted). Well designed road signs can be seen from a distance by drivers and the message on the sign can be immediately understood (even at 50 miles an hour). Well designed furniture serves a distinct purpose such as a chair designed for comfortable sitting or a desk designed for studying.

In all of the cases, a designer(s) took time to plan their designs using their skills, experience and tools such as color, materials and budget. Different disciplines require different tools, of course. The Web Designer often finds herself having to organize information, give it meaning and hopefully make it visually pleasing using the tools available to her.

When you design for the web you encounter some unique challenges compared to other disciplines such as furniture or book design. One of the most significant challenges is the indisputable fact that web design is still in its infancy and is evolving rapidly. In fact with the fluid nature of the Internet even the definition of "web design" itself is evolving and hard to define. 10 years ago web design generally meant designing pages for a web browser. While this is still true, what about the rapidly evolving nature of mobile devices, smart phones and consumer electronics that can access the web? We generally make the distinction between "mobile" design and "web" design today, but this distinction gets fuzzier as mobile devices get larger, and we no longer rely on a web browser on a personal computer to access the web. For many web professionals this rapid evolution of the medium is part of what makes it such an exciting field to work in.

Just because the design of web pages and web sites is an evolving field doesn't mean that designers have to reinvent the wheel however. Web design's closest relative is print design, and although the two are distinctly different and provide very different challenges, it is worthwhile comparing and contrasting them.

The difference between print design and web design

Print is seeing. The web is doing. Books, magazines, posters, newspapers, brochures, and advertisements all contain information (usually text and images) whose intent is to deliver some sort of message or content to a reader. Designers often create material that is a call to action.

- A movie poster's call to action might be "See this movie!"
- A soup can's label might have a call to action which is "Buy me! I'm tasty!"

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- A book's call to action might be "Turn the page!"

However all of these are not the actions themselves. Print is always one step removed from the call to action if we compare it to the web which is more interactive. As an example, think of flyer advertising a shoe sale at a local store. The call to action is "Show up at the store Saturday the 12th to buy these shoes at a discount." Now think of a website for a shoe store which is offering an online sale, in this case the call to action is: "Buy these shoes now by adding them to your shopping cart and we'll take 15% off."

In both of these examples the end result is hopefully the same for the shoe store's owner: the customer buys the shoes. In both cases information was transferred from the store to the customer, however the intent of the shoestore website was much more active. This is a crucial piece to understand: the web is an active medium and there's even a term that acknowledges this: user interaction.

The web demands user interaction

The experience of a website is defined by the interaction the user has with it. One clicks on navigation or scrolls down to read a page.

It seems a bit silly to define the act reading a book as "user interaction" but for the sake of argument, let's try. People read from left to right down a page (in certain parts of the world!), they turn pages and scan page numbers and tables of contents in order to find a certain chapter or topic. Breaking it down this way seems strange though because the act of reading is deeply ingrained: for the past century, books, magazines, newspapers, and advertisements have maintained virtually the same structure.

Coming back to the web, we don't just have readers we have users, think of the verbs used to describe what we do online: we search websites, watch the weather report, transfer money between accounts, book airline flights, and do many other things.

Defining User Experience

In many ways the power of the web and the numerous things that users can do on a website is potentially the largest challenge for web designers. Too many options can be just as bad as not enough. If there are multiple pathways available for the user, it is the designer's responsibility to point out which path might be preferable. The entire sum of a user's interactions with a website can be called the user experience.

The focus on the user experience differentiates websites from printed products more than anything else. In fact this job is so important that there are web professionals called information architects. Information architecture is defined as the structure of a web site and its pages: how is the site and the site navigation organized. In its most strict form, information architects are not concerned about issues such as color, type and graphics. In larger design agencies, it is not uncommon to have an information architect collaborating with the designers, especially at the beginning stages.

The reality is, most designers need to think as information architects. Does your design provide the best structure to allow your users to get the information they want? Have you provided the most efficient way to allow a user to put an object in a shopping cart and make a purchase? In their analysis, designers must fully comprehend the web as a medium and understand its rules and possibilities regarding not just visual design but writing as well.