

KCG Perspective on Marketing & Selling

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Top Ten Web Design Mistakes

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Abstract:

As a company's Web site becomes more and more central to its marketing efforts, marketing executives feel an increasing amount of pressure to "get it right." Given the huge number of difficult choices that they will face during the process of building a good marketing site, it's not surprising to see many people falling prey to the same mistakes over and over. This Perspective outlines the ten most prevalent errors that plague the process of designing and building corporate Web sites.

Situation:

Every company will design and build its Web site in a different way. Some will do it completely in-house, with a dedicated staff of creatives and programmers, while other will outsource the entire project to an agency. Most fall somewhere in between those extremes. Some marketing executives want to determine the structure of the site, but leave the look and feel to an agency. They may need help with the structure, but want to write the copy themselves. In any case, the marketing team nearly always keeps a tight grip on the approval process, trying to ensure that the final site meets its marketing objectives.

Sadly, this often fails to happen. Much of the time, it is due to lingering misconceptions about the Web and how Web users operate. Somewhere in the site structure, design, copywriting or programming, common mistakes will creep in and taint the site – sometimes even to the point that the site will fail to deliver on its initial goals.

Analysis:

Creating a corporate Web site is a complex, multifaceted task, and there are many good sources of "instructions" and project planning tools that will help refine the process. However, with that in mind, the best starting point is knowing what doesn't work. In that spirit, we present the top ten Web design mistakes.

Mistake #1: Brochureware

Thankfully, this mistake is not as common as it used to be. In general, companies are no longer approaching their sites in terms of which existing brochures they will be "replacing" with their site. Nonetheless, far too many sites are organized in terms of product lists, with the standard "features and benefits" model that is commonplace on product brochures and data sheets. Customers generally buy solutions, not products. A site that is organized by benefit and solution will be easier to navigate than one that is organized according to an internal product scheme.

In addition, brochureware sites do not consider the different audiences that may be visiting and searching for information. A prospect is going to want different information than an industry analyst or a potential investor – sales teams spend a lot of effort customizing their PowerPoint

presentations for different audiences, but the company's Web site often presents the same "slides" to everyone.

Mistake #2: Recycling Marketing Copy

Even when a site is not a page-for-page replication of existing brochures, site designers and copy-writers often crib their Web copy from corporate collateral. It's understandable; the company paid good money to have those brochures written and probably spent long hours developing the positioning and messaging that the copy was written to support. However, it is a known fact that Web surfers do not read many of the pages they visit. Study after study confirms that visitors will skim your pages, looking for bullet points, links and key words and phrases that will lead them to the information they are looking for. Furthermore, very few users scroll down the page to look for more options; they primarily choose from visible links and navigation. Long pages, with a lot of copy, will likely never be read by anyone outside your company.

Web copy should be short, bulleted, and broken into successive levels of detail. Once visitors locate the category of information that they are seeking, they will read a more detailed page. But those pages should be far down in the structure of the site, so browsing visitors can ignore them if they do not apply.

Mistake #3: Designing for Yourself

Another trap that is extremely easy to fall into is designing a site that appeals to you and your marketing staff, rather than one that will appeal to your key constituencies. You may love cool rollover graphics, pop-up menus, flashy animations and wild colors, but do those elements help your visitors find the information they are looking for? Are you absolutely sure that your visitors have the appropriate browser, plug-in or technology to see the same elements that you see? If not, you should seriously consider redesigning the site to work without them.

This is not to say that your site should not look good. It should, but hot graphic design is not a goal in and of itself. It should augment the usefulness and functionality of your site, never replace or hinder it.

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Mistake #4: The Site from Another Planet

Some companies take Design (with a capital D) to the extreme and deliberately make their sites hard to use. In the spirit of appearing "bleeding edge," a company may design a site that uses bizarre color schemes, indecipherable icons, unusual fonts, and hard to read, purposefully obsequious body copy. Perhaps the rationale is that people will appreciate something more if they have to work hard to get it, like a trendy nightclub that refuses entrance to most visitors.

Unless you are Nike, Pepsi or Sony, very few people will put up with your site if it fails to follow standard design and navigation conventions. Some visitors may appreciate the novelty and you might win some fancy design awards for your bravery, but it is doubtful that you will attract the kind of quality visitors that will increase your bottom line.

Mistake #5: Premature Launch

Nothing paints a big "L" on the forehead of your company like having the dreaded "Under Construction" or "Coming Soon" text on some of your pages. When visitors click on a link within your site, they expect to be taken to information that relates to the link they clicked. If they are

taken to a page that is blank except for a “Coming Soon” blurb, they will feel cheated. No one wants to play content roulette with your site and try to guess which pages have useful content and which pages are “Under Construction.”

There is no shame in adding new sections or navigation to your site as the content becomes available. In fact, you should be continually improving the content, flow and structure of your site (in this way, all sites are constantly under construction). If you don’t have a customer list, don’t link to a page called “Customer List” until you do. The only thing such a link will do is call attention to your company’s shortcomings.

Mistake #6: Flashy Introductions

Imagine walking into a store or business and having to sit through a five-minute skit, outlining the benefits of doing business with the company, before you are able to proceed with whatever you came there to do. Even if the production value and quality of the presentation were top-notch, you would still feel held hostage. In the worst case, you would simply walk out, never to return. Even if you stay, you will resent having to delay your business at the company’s whim.

Remember that the Web is not a passive, broadcast medium. It is an interactive medium and users expect to be able to control their experience. Usability tests show that up to 90% of visitors look for and press the “Skip Intro” button when presented with a flashy introduction screen. Regardless of the level of quality, multimedia content should always be optional.

Mistake #7: My Brother is a Web Designer

As damaging as an over-designed site can be, a poorly designed one is usually worse. Often, companies will try to save some money by letting a friend or internal designer build their Web site. Several software packages make it extremely easy to put together HTML pages. This, in turn, creates the perception that because anybody can create Web pages, it is easy to create Web sites. A bad designer with expensive software and good intentions will still create an amateurish site.

Designing and building quality Web sites is a craft that takes years to perfect. If you truly want your Web site to attract and impress prospects, partners and influencers, you should make sure that the designer has the experience and the skill to build it well.

Mistake #8: Stale as Yesterday’s Donuts

Many marketers think of their Web sites as static sets of content, often not revising or updating their pages until the next “launch.” This strategy undermines one of the strengths of the medium, namely the ability to continually add fresh content and modify the structure and functionality based on user feedback and analyzed site traffic.

A well-designed site will have a carefully planned maintenance schedule, which details when new content is added and how revisions will be made. Broken links and bugs need to be fixed as they arise, while news and announcements can be added on a daily or weekly basis. New navigation or features can be worked in on a monthly or semi-monthly schedule and the look and feel should be updated at least twice a year.

Mistake #9: Failing the Test

If software developers released their products without adequate user testing, they would quickly go out of business. Software companies set up elaborate and expensive QA labs to ensure that their releases are as bug-free as possible before shipping them to their customers. It’s a shame that the same strategy is rarely applied to corporate Web sites.

Broken links, server errors, overloaded servers and slow pages are all indicators of sloppy, careless site design and can drive visitors away in droves. At the very least companies should build a week or two into their launch schedule to test every link and every piece of functionality of the site before they go live. A better strategy is to hire a professional usability testing firm to evaluate the usability and functionality of your site and be sure your launch schedule has plenty of time for fixing any usability problems.

Mistake #10: If You Build It They Will Come

Finally, regardless of how beautiful, well-structured and functional your site is, it will fail if you do not have a program in place to attract visitors. It is amazing how often we see companies spend amazing amounts of money on the design and programming for their site, without spending a dime on promotion.

At the minimum, your site should be registered with the top search engines that your prospects will be likely to use, META tags should be developed carefully and placed on every page that you wish people to find, and e-mails should be sent to your contact database to inform your constituents that you have launched a new Web site.

The best course of action is to create an integrated marketing campaign, and tie your site launch into a product launch, analyst or press tour, or a conference or trade show. That way, you can promote your new site in conjunction with your existing marketing efforts. Usually, a new site is not sufficiently noteworthy to build an exclusive campaign around.

Best Practice:

While simply avoiding these ten common pitfalls is not enough to guarantee a successful Web site, the general ideas presented here will get you a long way toward achieving your Web marketing objectives. To summarize:

- **Design for your audience** – make sure your site is easy to use and contains the relevant content that your most important constituencies will be looking for.
- **Revise Relentlessly** – when new, interesting content becomes available, add it to your site as soon as reasonable.
- **Don't Skimp on Quality** – use experienced, professional designers, programmers and information architects, and schedule enough time to test your site thoroughly.
- **Let the World Know** – launch your site in coordination with established marketing efforts and make sure your immediate circle of customers, partners and influencers know about the new site.

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