Web Design vs. Print Design

A look at the differences in designing for each medium.

by Helen Bradley

A statement like, “Web design — it’s not print design,” is likely to invoke a resounding “duh” from seasoned web professionals, but it is a quantum leap to go from designing print documents to designing for the web. This article looks at some of the differences. When you understand these differences, you’ll be better prepared to advise your clients and design sites that fulfill both the client’s and your requirements.

GET A FEEL FOR PRINTED MATERIAL
Think about magazines standing on a bookseller’s shelf. You can see each magazine clearly — their covers delineate where they begin and end. The same information isn’t available on a website simply because the web is a continuum of linked pages. It is quite possible to move from one website to another accidentally. Therefore, maintaining a consistent look within a website is essential so users will know when they’ve inadvertently jumped to another site, for example.

When you open a magazine, chances are, you’ll quickly find a table of contents and a section with the publisher’s contact details within the first few pages. This is standard in most publications. Similar design standards exist to help visitors find their way around websites. For example, a visitor who wants to find contact information for the group sponsoring the site will look for a link called Contact Us or something similar and, if they want to see what’s available on the site, they’ll look for a series of links or perhaps a site map.

When you break these unwritten web design rules, you put your visitor at a disadvantage — nothing he or she has learned up to that point about navigating a website can help on your site. As a designer, this may feel as if you’re developing something exciting and cutting edge. Unfortunately, to most visitors it’s a frustrating disaster.

Unless your site is extremely avant-garde and caters to visitors who can be expected to take the time (and make the effort) to find their way around without the help of the standard tools, you should place information where they expect to find it. It reduces the risk that they’ll get frustrated and go to a site where they feel more welcome.

WHERE AM I?
It’s unlikely that you’d find a magazine on a bookstore shelf that displays anything other than its cover. In addition, when you pick it up, all the pages come with it because they are glued or stapled together.

The same is not true of a website, where a person can land on a site a long way from the site’s homepage. When visitors land on a page in the outer regions of a website it is important that they can establish where they are quickly. Every web page should show the company name, publication and contact details, and a navigation system. Without this, the
only alternative may be to click the browser's Back button and exit the same way they entered.

WHERE THE WEB WINS
While there are many features of print design that make it more flexible than designing for the web, the web has its good points, too. The web wins over print in immediacy and your ability to know what visitors are doing and to interact with them.

For example, the designer responsible for creating a magazine can't know how the magazine is received by its audience without doing an expensive survey or assembling a group of people and actually watching them as they turn the pages.

On the web, using the correct technology, you can identify visitors when they first enter your site (not by name but it is possible to distinguish them from other visitors). You can then track the pages they visit so you can know which are the most popular pages and how deep into your site your visitors delve.

You can also interact with your visitors in real time. For example, you can provide an e-mail form so you can immediately return information to them. A checking routine can make sure key information is included — or the form is returned to be fixed.

The immediacy of the web also makes it possible to sell goods in real time. You can take a customer's order and credit card details, calculate shipping and taxes, and process the order online in a matter of minutes. If the online stock description is linked to inventory records, you can indicate if the stock is on hand or on backorder.

It's important to note that instant gratification via the web is creating a breed of online shoppers who expect this level of service — if your site doesn't offer it, they may go elsewhere. The benefit to the business is that the customer is doing the data entry, allowing the business to move from order to fulfillment more quickly.

A magazine (or product brochure, catalog, or other printed piece) also has a limited circulation. There is a chance someone may pass on a copy, but generally it stops where it is sent. On the other hand, once your website is up, it's potentially accessible by anyone with a computer and an internet connection anywhere in the world. This includes your customers, your suppliers, and your competition.

REORGANIZING YOUR DESIGN TOOLKIT
Not all the tools you're used to using when designing for print can be applied in the same way on the web.

■ Image formats. There are two image formats that can be displayed consistently by most web browsers: JPEG and GIF. In addition, web image file sizes are much smaller than the files needed for print reproduction and are measured in kilobytes, not megabytes.

■ Color inaccuracy. Images that are fine on a Mac may look shades darker on a PC. In addition, monitor settings will affect how colors look.

■ Fonts. The fonts available for web pages are the fonts each visitor has installed on his or her computer. This limits you to a small set of core web fonts or to using images or embedded fonts that bloat page sizes and increase download times.

■ Size. Some visitors still have displays set at 640 x 480. If you can't remember what pages look like at that resolution, adjust your monitor. Your job is to make your site look good at any size.

■ Consistency. HTML code is open to interpretation by a web browser — this might seem strange but this flexibility in interpreting code is written into the HTML specifications. In addition, just because something is in the HTML specifications doesn't mean that all browsers support it, much less support it as the specifications require. Generally, browsers lag behind the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) recommendations and support for some features may be years behind. In addition, there are variations between versions of each major browser.

There's a lot more to developing a successful website than investing in GoLive or Dreamweaver. The web is a different world; it asks for some different skills, but in return it offers new challenges and plenty of fun.

Next month: Web content — how to determine what you need and how to make sure you get it.