

10 **TEN TOP WEB-SITE TIPS**

Use these 10 keys to shape your Web site.

BY JP FRENZA & LESLIE HOFFMAN

In previous columns, we've discussed the importance of having a presence on the Internet and explored strategies for structuring your content on the World Wide Web (WWW). The next step is your Web site design—that is, how your site looks and feels to the community of Internet users.

If you take a trip to the computer section of the bookstore, you'll find numerous books on designing Web sites. They're worth taking a look at, and many offer excellent advice for beginning Web builders. In this column we'll focus on 10 keys to help you shape the design of your Web site.

1 REGARD DESIGN AS A CRUCIAL PART OF BUILDING YOUR WEB SITE.

As obvious as this advice might seem, a quick tour of the Web reveals that many nonprofit organizations (and for-profit businesses, for that matter) don't place enough importance on design. While we won't name any names, we can say this: A poorly designed Web site can be worse for an organization's image than having no Web site at all.

Not that design is more important than content. But content and context (the design through which content is delivered) are equally important on the Internet. Good design may not win you any awards, but bad design may turn off a large portion of the Web surfing audience.

**FIGURE 1**

If you build a good Web site, you can easily reach 100,000 people.

2 VIEW DESIGN AS AN EXTENSION OF EVERYTHING YOUR ORGANIZATION DOES.

Your Web site will likely connect you with the largest audience you ever reach. If you mail 10,000 brochures, you reach 10,000 people. If you build a good Web site, you can easily reach 100,000 people from all over the world. So be sure your Web site captures what is special about your organization.

Too often we see nonprofits that have outstanding logos, brochures, and media kits but don't translate that identity to the Web. You'll do some things differently on the Web, of course, because it's a more flexible medium than print. The important thing is that you maintain a consistent image.

3 KEEP IT SIMPLE, KEEP IT CLEAN.

There's a good technical reason for keeping your design simple: The more elements you design onto your Web page, the larger the file size for that page. For example, a page with a white background and text might be as small as 3K. A file with five photos and several other graphics might be as large as 100K. File size affects the speed at which Web surfers can look at your Web site.

Keeping your design simple will also make it easier for people to use. Take a look at the Web site for the League of Conservation Voters (Figure 1), for instance. The Web viewer is given several basic, clear choices, such as what's new at the organization, a guide to Congress, and so on.

In another example, Showcase New York's home page (Figure 2) features a clean, bold look that doesn't overburden the page. This design reflects a professional program with a clear identity—a good rule for design and communication.

4 IDENTIFY YOUR AUDIENCE & DESIGN FOR THEM.

There's a grocery store in New York's Upper East Side which advertises that "taste is a matter of opinion but quality is a matter of fact." Keep this slogan in mind when designing your Web site. No two people will find your site's design to their taste—some will like it and others won't. As long as your design is professional, matters of taste should be irrelevant.

The best way to ensure an appropriate design is to carefully identify whom you want to view your Web site. Then design for that audience. Because your site will be accessible by millions of people, you'll have many visitors outside your main audience. As long as your main audience is comfortable with your site, you've accomplished your goal.

How do you know if your site design works? The best way is to show it to several people inside and outside your organization and get their feedback. Once you go live with your site, encourage site visitors to e-mail their feedback. The Web community is well-known for offering helpful feedback on a site's workability.

Defining your audience will also let you create appropriate technology standards. For example, if you decide that your audience is the general public, you might target the most basic computer configurations and speeds. You might also decide against adding multime-



FIGURE 2

If you find yourself downloading what you think are cool graphics, don't do it!

dia (audio, video, etc.), since it wouldn't be accessible to your intended audience. In some cases, you might decide your site has two different audiences. At Earth Pledge, for example, one part of our site promotes the concept of sustainability to the general public. We designed that section with few graphics, since text is the most efficient way to present information to the general audience. On the other hand, our foundation also works with several high-technology firms. Since they are also our audience, we add components (such as animation, interactive databases, etc.) to appeal to their interests.

In short, no matter how much technology is involved in creating your Web site, your audience should drive the design. Not the other way around.

5 DESIGN FOR ONE PLATFORM, SHOOT FOR OKAY ON THE REST.

One of the biggest problems in designing a Web site is the delivery platform. If you create a 20-page brochure, you can assume that your audience will read it page by page starting with the first page. On the Web that isn't the case. There's no universal standard used by every viewer when it comes to looking at Web pages. For example, Web pages designed on and for Macintosh computers look different from those designed or viewed on Windows machines. In addition, the Web browser, the software the computer uses to navigate the Web in a graphical fashion, isn't consistent among computer users. The two most popular Web browsers are Netscape's Navigator and Microsoft's Internet Explorer. Even carefully designed Web pages when viewed with Navigator can look very different than when viewed with Internet Explorer. Some differences are subtle, but

some are major. Many Web pages that look fine on Internet Explorer aren't readable in Navigator. And the situation gets worse when you consider that Netscape and Internet Explorer are only two of over 14 Web browsers available. Unfortunately, the more design you have in your pages, the more dissimilar they'll look on different browsers.

So what's a nonprofit to do? There aren't any easy answers. Large commercial Web developers spend a great deal of time, effort, and expense to address this issue. In some cases, Web developers actually create two sites—one that looks good in Netscape and one that looks good in Internet Explorer.

Nonprofit organizations would be right to avoid that time-consuming and costly capability. The best strategy is to pick one platform and browser and design for that configuration. Then test the design on the other browser to make sure it's acceptable. In short, shoot for one target, and do your best to cover your bases when it comes to the others. Chances are that if your site features a simple, clean design for your targeted audience, the end result will be just fine.

6 KEEP IT SMALL!

As we mentioned earlier, the more design elements you put on a page, the larger that page will be. The larger the page, the longer it takes to be downloaded. Like our national highway system, sometimes the Internet gets too much traffic, and information can't move around as freely and quickly as it needs to. That's not something you can affect through your site design. But perhaps the biggest factor in determining how quickly people can view your pages is the speed of the modem they use. In early Internet days, modems

exchanged data by communicating at a rate of about 14.4 Kbps (kilobits per second). As the technology improved, that speed was bumped up to 28.8. Today, the top speed for a modem connection is 56.6, which is a substantial improvement over the 14.4 days. But not everyone is using a 56.6 modem. When determining your audience, you'll have to make an assumption about the speed of their modems. If you believe that your audience is all connected to the Internet using state-of-the-art 56.6 technology (or are connected to high-speed networks at work) then by all means think about animation, video, and sound for your Web site. Chances are that won't be the case, however. For the time being, you'll probably need to design for an audience that connects to the Internet using a 14.4 or 28.8 modem.

Let's assume your Web page is 10K in size. To download that file, it would take nine seconds on a 14.4 and five seconds on a 28.8 modem. If your Web page is 20K, download time would be 13 seconds for a 14.4 modem and nine seconds on a 28.8 modem. A 100K Web page would take 74 seconds on a 14.4 modem and 37 seconds on a 28.8 modem.

There's no rule for how large a file should be. Web users are generally comfortable if your Web pages take from five to 30 seconds to download. It's a good idea to vary the size of your Web pages. Pages that contain mostly text will be smaller. Others, which have animations or photos, can run a little larger. If you provide good content and vary the information, people will be more inclined to accept the occasional larger page.

7 STEER CLEAR OF TECHNOLOGY FOR THE SAKE OF TECHNOLOGY.

When you first start to poke around the Web, you'll notice that it is a vast repository of multimedia and "gee whiz gizmos." Unless you're highly skilled in new-media production, avoid the temptation to build these into your Web site! There's nothing worse than a Web site chock-full of unnecessary animations, spinning logos, Java rollovers, and 3D images, all unrelated to the site's content. In short, don't use technology on your Web site just because it can be done. Use it only when it enhances your organization's mission.

8 AVOID CLICHÉ.

If you spend any time on the Web, you'll encounter the same images on about half the sites. Perhaps the most well-recognized is the stick figure swinging a shovel. Lots of Web sites feature this "Under Construction" character on pages that aren't ready for public viewing. Many sites also display an envelope folding closed to indicate electronic mail. While these animations may have been amusing at first, they've been seen by so many Web surfers that using them downgrades your site's quality. If you find yourself downloading what you think are cool graphics (and, of course, it's OK to download them because they're royalty-free), don't do it! Chances are a million other Web builders thought the same thing. On the Web, put your best design foot forward—not someone else's.

9 DON'T COMPETE WITH THE HYPE.

Many nonprofits ask how they can compete for an audience on the Web given all the money invested by large entertainment companies. The answer is: Don't worry. Most Web users are searching for information, not entertainment. What else accounts for the fact that CNN has one of the most heavily visited sites on the Web? Develop your content, present it well, and the rest will take care of itself.

10 HIRE A PRO!

This is probably the hardest advice for nonprofits to swallow. Let's face it, tight budgets don't always afford the luxury of hiring a professional designer. Again, however, don't worry. There are ways to avoid spending a fortune on design expertise. Nonprofits are well-versed in developing pro bono relationships, and Web development needn't be an exception. It's possible to find a designer or Web developer who will work with your organization free of charge or at a reduced rate. Our foundation manages a program with Microsoft Corporation which provides software, training, and support for the greater New York nonprofit community. Part of that program matches nonprofit organizations with our area's leading for-profit Web development shops. One thing we've learned is that there are a lot of companies that see the benefits of helping nonprofits and are more than willing to lend their expertise to the community. ■

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These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center. For ordering information, see the Society's *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

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