

# What Web Design Won't Fix

Be sure your website design doesn't cloud your message.

By Max T. Russell

San asked me to analyze his organization's website. I looked at it for 60 seconds and gave him the low-down. "Forget all concerns about website design," I said. "What you need to do is show your stakeholders and potential clients exactly what your organization does."

What clued me into a missing, unified message? San had never fully distinguished himself from what he used to be. He used to help schools obtain funding for special-needs playground equipment. He also serviced the equipment and advised schools, parks, and agencies on choosing playground units.

He actually wanted to spend all his time with elementary schools, because that's where his heart was and that's where the biggest market for his services was. But his website sent a different message. It depicted him as a jack-of-all-trades and not necessarily a master of any. The problem is that, when he wrote his web content, he couldn't separate the highly relevant concepts from the main one. There was just way too much stuff!

That didn't necessarily mean San had to get rid of the things that weren't his main focus. It meant he had to put each concept in its place and reveal it only as needed. (There are a variety of ways to do that, such as putting each category under a separate tab.)

In San's case, he probably *did* need to remove all the concepts except the main one, at least temporarily. I'm not talking about redesigning his website. I'm talking about defogging his head.

It should be any organizational leader's priority every week to keep the main thing the main thing, as the saying goes. Most nonprofits turn much of their identity over to web designers, which results in websites with scattered, disjointed presentations. Many sites that look right, graphically, are poorly constructed.

Your message should be clear and strong and unified before you ever commit to a web design. Determine a single main identity by keeping it distinct from all other information. If



you must keep the other information, place it in separate *mental* locations. Begin the web design phase only after you've nailed down a distinct, uncluttered identity, one that will ring as clear as a bell – one web page at a time – to your staff, your donors, and your target clients. **S**



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## Keep Your Eye on the Message

For more on creating a clear message for your website, see articles such as these at [NonprofitWorld.org](http://NonprofitWorld.org):

**How to Develop Anything in Writing** (Vol. 33, No. 2)

**Wow People with Your Digital Material** (Vol. 34, No. 2)

**The Five Biggest Website Mistakes Nonprofits Make – and How to Avoid Them** (Vol. 29, No. 5)

**What the Heck Are You Trying to Say?** (Vol. 34, No. 2)

**Planning for Digital Longevity** (Vol. 34, No. 1)