



ASPAC CONSULTING GROUP

Marketing Consultants

ABN 57 279 943 512

Choosing a website design

Design as one of many communication elements

The Internet today has largely replaced traditional methods of seeking and providing information. This is now invariably done via a search engine, where the enquirer is asking for information that matches specified key words and phrases. While this opens up many issues of search engine optimisation, like content development, navigation and link building beyond the scope of this article, it does highlight that design is merely one of the complex elements in getting information to the target prospect. If the information is hidden by graphics techniques that the search engine cannot penetrate, a site that might potentially meet the user's needs might be indexed and listed so poorly as to be invisible.

The selection and/or avoidance of certain design techniques can have considerable impact on the search rankings, as well as upon the reaction of visitors. Flash, especially when used for "landing" pages is virtually asking the search engine to ignore the site, simply because the former cannot access the information and therefore cannot index it in its databases. Designers love watching numbers indicating the page loading time and demonstrating how clever they with enhanced graphics but the client is entitled to ask if these are relevant at best, or downright annoying, at worst. Excessive use of java for drop for menus and information subsets is generally a sound technique but they can interfere with the actions of search engine crawlers unless carefully utilised.

Personal taste is largely irrelevant

One of the first things a professional website developer does (or should do) is determine the characteristics, interests and information-needs of the target market with which the proposed website is to communicate. There will be more commonalities than differences that apply to the members of virtually any group, where it should be possible to define with reasonable accuracy the range of ages, whether there is a bias to males or females and what interests are likely to be the "triggers" that encourage purchase decisions. If this profile can be created with reasonable accuracy, the elements of website development become very clear. Though there will always be some middle ground, the quest for meeting the mindset of the persons within the segment is fundamentally important. What appeals to the business owner or marketing manager is largely irrelevant.

Armed with this understanding, the design criteria become fairly easy. The colours, typefaces, the simplicity (or otherwise) of the page layout, the use of relevant images all contribute to the "look and feel" best suited to the particular audience at which the site is aimed.

Good examples may be found on the websites of major financial institutions, Telcos, "top-end" manufacturers and many government instrumentalities, almost all of which will have in common the benefit of extensive (and expensive) target audience research to determine the positive and negative factors that will drive the site design and the content. However, this does not mean that the relevant logic and skill is available only to those with mega-budgets. The principles are fairly simple and may be applied by almost any marketer.

Conversely, the web has a vast number of site designs that are totally inappropriate to the business. Examples of bad design and/or content are not confined to small business, or even to Internet marketers. Precisely the same scenario applies to many corporate websites where inappropriate graphics simply fail to create any positive synergy with the presumed target audience.

Where to start

If professional research is beyond the means of the business enterprise, there are consultants who will bring a thorough understanding of the techniques to the process of information strategy. If already familiar with the category, they may dispense with much of the preliminary evaluation about customer characteristics, but they will still want to determine the values of the business offers and how best to relate these in the form of design and content.

Regardless of whether the preliminary work is being done in-house, or by a consultant, the best place to determine what is and is not appropriate is by looking at one's competitors, also at relevant user group forums. The latter in particular frequently offers scathing comments about suppliers, their products and services. Far from being irrelevant, they express in words what many others may be thinking. Regardless of the actual comments themselves, it is their perceptions of the brands, suppliers and issues they consider important that greatly help decide what one should and not do to project one's own value propositions. If the business claims to know all this already and does not need to pay to get it, it is valid to ask why therefore it has not already been incorporated into the website and other communication devices.

Actual design options

It is hoped that the comments in this article demonstrate the relevance of logic and process as the drivers behind any design, rather than by personal tastes. It is helpful for the marketer to look at as many websites as possible in the target category and those similar in nature to it. It may be possible to find a standard template from one of the many on-line design libraries, but care should be taken not to over-simplify the way in which these can be used to best effect. The reverse situation is as bad, namely giving a designer virtual carte blanche without specifying the precise criteria we have examined here.