Writing & editing gallery

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Beyond www.Me-Me-Me.com: making your websites "visitor centric"

By Greg Irsfeld

EVERYONE agrees that people are busy. Online, that makes for folks ardently looking to find what they want — whether it's industrial adhesive, a yard swing or the community soccer schedule — quickly, without a lot of barriers.

So why is it that you still see so much prime, homepage real estate sporting overlarge, spinning corporate logos and links to "a message from the president?" Answer: the folks responsible for such sites haven't yet figured out that, as "ego-centric" websites fail, "visitor-centric" websites succeed.

The experience is the message

To illustrate, consider two fictional websites touting a competing commodity — let's say, cheese.

Turns out you're looking for a cheese platter for Sunday's game. It's Friday, and you decide to search online (using your residential dial-up, 28.8 modem connection). Astonishingly (remember, this is fiction — anything's possible), your search on keywords *"Cheese AND Platters"* returns web links to just two local suppliers.

You hit the first site, where you're greeted by a *"(please wait . . . movie loading.)"* message. Next your browser prompts you to download and install a plug-in to play the movie. You accept, and some time later (remember, you're doing this over a 28.8 dialup), a movie plays, greeting you with a beautiful, awe-inspiring . . . animated cheese image.

When the movie stops, the page loads, and you see the home page links — *About us*, *Our history*, *Our products*, *Contact us*. Your click on *Our Products* takes you to another page that features several other images arduously downloading. When fully displayed, they reveal smaller graphics of various cheese types, ergo, *Cheddar*, *Swiss*, *Munster.* At this point — several minutes into the site — there's still nothing resembling a cheese platter, let alone

anything on price or availability.

OK. Now imagine that you check out the other site. Almost immediately, THIS home page displays text — including navigation links — followed seconds later by smaller, supportive graphics. Navigation links to _About us_, _Our history_, _Our products_ and _Contact us_, are joined by _Our Specialties_ — which just happens to feature the item, _Cheese Platters_ as a "Sunday Special." — along with _Prices_ and _Where to buy_. This is all displayed on the first page, above the scroll, within eight seconds of hitting the site.

Pop quiz: which fictional site would you say provides a more "visitor-centric"experience? Which one would you visit again?

So, how do you make sure your site is visitor-centric?

Make it Fast

Think smaller graphics. Nothing says ego — or "first generation site" — faster than a big, corporate logo downloading into half of the home page. Even with larger monitors, there just isn't a whole lot of screen real estate. What's there is better used to display information that visitors want — relevant content. Smaller graphics load quicker, and can be more effective than large graphics. For sites showing multiple products, use an index page of thumbnail images that link to and display larger graphics when clicked. Examples: www.rei.com; www.victoriassecret.com.

Think Text First. For information, for navigation, remember: text loads first. Before requesting a stylized "corporate font" be used on your website, know that to display properly, anything outside of the ubiquitous system fonts — Times, Arial and (to a certain extent), Verdana — must be made into bandwidth-hogging graphics.

Instead of using graphical buttons for navigation, consider using text navigation. What you might (arguably) lose in style, you'll make up for in download speed. Examples of good text navigation with style: www.cnet.com; www.microsoft.com; www.techies.com.

Make it Simple

Don't fear the template. There's a reason that most newspapers and news magazines look and feel

the same. The design works, and it's what audiences have come to expect.

Web page design templates — top header, left navigation, bottom page footer — offered by out-of-the-box web development software (Microsoft FrontPage, NetObjects Fusion) and free online site development tools, such as those offered by Wizmo, are effective for the same reason.

Think Choice. Good sites needn't be austere. If you think it adds value to the visit, include such things as larger graphics, animation and Flash movies. Yet consider making them an *option* that visitors can *request*, rather than a default they have no choice but to wait through. Examples: www.msnbc.com.

Palm Readings. Web-reading handhelds — Palm Pilots, cell phones — are advancing on the web market. Such devices favor simple, clean, fast design. Think your site is optimized for a standard computer monitor? In CNET's www.builder.com story, "Minimalist Web Design," author Bill Austin suggests, "Now is the time to be thinking about what your pages will look like on a 1.28-inch screen." (Note: this story also links to a site that lets you view any site — including yours — for text-only viewing).

Good design is transparent. Large, animated graphics and multimedia movies might make for cool, splashy sites, but they're also bandwidth overhead. If you really need them, use them, but use them wisely.

If your site can't get along without a home page intro movie developed in Flash — one of the more bandwidth-friendly tools out there — at least give visitors the option to "skip intro" (your repeat visitors especially will appreciate this). Make sure the technology adds value to your message. Examples:

- www.thenorthface.com

- National Geographic's Sustainable Seas Monterrey Bay site

Make it Relevant

Know thine audience. Learn what your audience wants from you online, and then give it to them. If most people coming to your site are looking for product support, make sure it's an easy-to-find homepage link.

If you don't know what your customers want online,

ask them. The online audience is more affluent and educated than the general public. If you give them a chance — feedback forms, online surveys — they'll be happy to tell you. The web can be a great two-way communications vehicle.

 Keep it updated. Think the date isn't important? What if THIS page read, "last updated September 25, . . . 1998. Uh huh. Remember: everyone else feels the same way. Make the commitment to maintain your information, and let visitors know it's the most current available.

 Meld your online and off-line operations. When it comes to your online contact information, offer as much detail as you can. Instead of a contact page with just a nameless "info@whatever.com" offer some choices. Use voice mail as a guide: *For corporate information, click here; for product questions, click here; to report a problem with this website, . . .,"* you get the picture. Then make sure your staff is ready to handle any influx of calls this might spark. Customer service remains an important component.

 "Visitor-centricity"

 If you've had your site for a while, take a moment to congratulate yourself for early adoption. OK, moment over. Now go review your site for its "visitor-centricity."

 If you're planning a site, back off the urge to make it "all about you." Your visitors — not to mention, your web developer (who more likely as not has been trying to tell you this) — will thank you.

 And remember: visitors online (including business-to-business folks) are using the internet as a research tool — a big consumer report. They are on-task, and on a mission, and they don't have time to wait for your corporate logo to download. They want solutions, and that means information. The sites that deliver relevant solutions quickly have the best shot at return on investment. It means taking your site beyond www.MeMeMe.com.

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