



Improve Your Website – Five Do's and Five Don'ts

Introduction

Some websites are easy to use, some are just OK and some are awful. Here are five things that you should do or include when designing a website and five things that should be avoided or left out (or taken out if they are already there).

1 Do – Allow the text to be re-sized

A larger percentage of the population needs glasses or has some problem with their eyesight. According to the Royal National Institute for the Blind over 300,000 people in UK are registered as being either blind or have problems with their sight that cannot be corrected by spectacles. Also as people get older their eyesight deteriorates; most people who are over 40 years old need to wear glasses. One in ten of the over 65s have some level of sight loss and this increases to one in four for the over 75s.

Internet Browsers (Internet Explorer, Firefox, Mozilla, Opera etc) are generally well-written and functionally rich programs. When basic W3C standards are adopted the website and its pages can use the browser's text resizing function: Browser: View > Text Size > Smaller, Small, Medium, Large, Larger to change the text size. But all too often this Browser function has no effect, or worse still it just increases the size of the 'bullet' in a list of values.

2 Do Not – Underline text (unless it is a link)

Probably the most commonly understood website convention is when links are underlined to show they are links. Clearly most Internet and PC users will assume the following is a link to Microsoft's website www.microsoft.com; blue text that underlined or any text that is underlined invites the user to go to the link, in this case Microsoft's website.

Using underline when the text is not a link confuses the users. For example, the text

Every day we have fantastic offers for all our visitors,

will have people clicking on the words 'fantastic offers', assuming it is a link to some bargains.

3 Do – Be consistent

The web designer and company employees will be familiar with the site layout. They will have viewed the site many times – unlike first time visitors who all too often find website navigation is unclear or difficult to interpret.

Ensure there is consistency between the 'Menu' name and the 'Web Page' name (and title). The menu option may say 'About Us' but the user will be confused if the web page is heading is 'The Company' also 'White Papers' may be similar to 'Case Studies' but the user will be surprised to see a page headed 'Case Studies' when they selected 'White Papers'. There just needs to be is some attention to detail to keep the two headings consistent; a menu with the heading 'White Papers' provide a web page of White Papers to view.



4 Do Not – Use Flash introductions

A few years ago Flash animation was new and nobody had seen it, it's not new anymore and everyone has seen it. Users no longer wish to see spinning letters that (eventually) spell out the company name ... they are too busy looking for the 'Skip Intro' option.

5 Do – Provide contact details on every page

Websites are often key marketing tools. The objectives of the site can vary but one objective will be to elicit a request or action from the visitor. For example:

- 1 Request more information
- 2 Subscribe to a weekly or monthly newsletter
- 3 Make a booking
- 4 Buy something

The request for more information should contain (if relevant) a pre-filled email eg when the email request for information is sent from the 'Widget' web page, the email could be pre-filled with the text: 'Please send the latest widget brochure and price list', and always include some space for additional input and comment.

And if you want people to subscribe to an email newsletter do you really need to know their job title, age, where they were born, how many children they have etc? This may be useful marketing information to collect in the long term, but people generally object to filling in five pages of questions just to subscribe to a weekly email.

It has been well documented that many purchases are abandoned because the buying process becomes too arduous. Searches are used to find the items, they are selected, a quantity entered, etc but the purchaser never reaches and clicks the really important button – 'Confirm Purchase' – so make the process simple and logical.

Always place contact information, telephone number, email link etc in a consistent place on every web page, rather than rely on a single option via a 'Contact Us' page.

6 Do Not – Make the site difficult to read

As much as we like magazines and website to be artistic and stylish, we still need to be able to read them easily. Small thin white text on a black background may look good from a distance, or on the designer's mock-up, but can be difficult to read.

In a magazine, which inherently has a better resolution than a computer screen, light grey text on a variable black or dark grey background can still be read. But on a computer screen it will cause eyestrain and the desire to go to a different website.

The problem can be compounded when the light grey text on a black background is also a 'Menu' – especially if the text is not underlined. The menu becomes a list of words, a list of words that is difficult to read.



7 Do – Optimise graphic and images

Although most people (or just many people – depending on the country) have Broadband access this may be shared. And today users are more impatient than ever. If a page takes more than a few seconds to load they become impatient. There is no reason for any graphic that will just be displayed on a computer screen to have a higher resolution than that supported by the computer.

An image that is 100mm by 100mm will look the same whether the file size is 2Mb or just 20k. The 2MB image will have greater quality but with an image size of 100mm by 100mm this quality will not be visible.

8 Do Not – use tables for positioning content

Many websites still use tables to position content because it is a quick and easy way of controlling and defining the position of website content. It is the website equivalent of using a spreadsheet for recording basic text information, and Excel does this extremely well. However when the same technique is applied to websites it can create problems. HTML (one of the languages used to create websites) is a tag based language and as such reads the instructions line by line, for users who have a disability and need to use for example a screen reader, the site structure (when tables are used to position content) is illogical.

9 Do – Provide an easy path ‘home’

Websites can be confusing for the first time user, so provide a single click option to get back to the ‘Home’ page. This facility is needed especially if the website does not have a menu system that is consistent over all of the web pages, or where no standard menu system is being used. A commonly accepted convention assumes that clicking on the company logo will take the user directly to the home page.

10 Do Not – Let the site get old and go stale

As the Internet became ubiquitous many prophesied the end of print media such as newspapers and magazines. However there seem to be more titles available today than ever before, with new publications covering ever wider and more diverse specialist interests.

The old adage – ‘content is king’ is still true. It applies to print media such as newspapers and magazines, and it also applies to websites. To keep people coming back to the website there needs to be informative features, lively articles, up-to-date news, relevant information and comment.

Summary

The company’s website can be its shop window; a place where people can come to browse, to be educated, to be informed ... and eventually they may even buy something or contract a service.

About the author

John Hookham is a director of maintenance management consulting and marketing services company Adrelia. Tel: 020 7286 7073 Website: www.adrelia.com