

The New Design Imperative: To Satisfy and Delight

by Jo Davison

Websites are corporate resources. Jo Davison's insights have to do with making them resources that generate real value in terms of brand, customer relationships, and sales. Design is the key to achieving these goals and, with illustrations from an industrial products company, a retailer, and a professional services firm, Davison details the elements of sites that are approachable, beautiful, and hard-working.



Jo Davison, Vice President-Creative,
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Design must reflect the practical and aesthetic in business, but above all... good design must primarily serve people.

—Thomas J. Watson, Sr., 1874-1956, businessman

For print collateral to separate itself from the crowd and delight its reader, three fundamental properties must prevail: concept, craftsmanship, and execution. Whether creating an annual report, sell sheets, a direct mail piece, or a capabilities brochure, the designer must begin with a great idea, define it through intelligent design, and execute it with attention to detail or run the risk of a dull piece that is easily dismissed.

The concept that establishes the

story to be conveyed is fundamental if the audience is to be engaged, its attention held, the message clearly communicated. Equally important, graphic design that conveys the message—type, color, and imagery; copy and its position on the page; pacing that reveals the story and punctuates the message—must be both passionate and smart. And finally, execution (the paper's weight and texture, black-and-white or color, finishes, assembly, and so on)

requires rigor to faithfully move the design into reality. And, when wonderfully done, the concept, craftsmanship, and execution combine to give the collateral its greatest chance of achieving the intended outcome.

The same is true of digital design. Whether creating a sales tool, a corporate website, or an online brochure, the designer must begin with a compelling concept. Without this framework, it is impossible to create an interactive experience that both engages and satisfies. In addition, the design must conform to both sides of the page—with sound design principles that govern the visual experience on the front end and expert functional alignment that delivers it on the back end.

But here's a difference. While print design evolved over many centuries (and continues to progress today), digital design has evolved at an unparalleled pace. First-generation websites functioned primarily as an information source, with straightforward design that supported pages of copy but lacked the capacity to excite or entertain. Second-generation website design grew from its predecessor, but technology was the rule and consequently content was often sacrificed in favor of flashing icons, multicolored graphics, and bright backgrounds. Today, third-generation websites deliver the ultimate user experience in fine detail, with technology at the service of the visual experience. Using metaphor to attract, psychographics to establish archetypes, and well-delineated, intuitive workflows that deliver multilayered, animated content, designers are creating satisfying, richly branded experiences.

Digital designers must respond to the organic, expansive nature of Web design and the complex, evolving standards that dominate the process. Standard among website designers and developers is the requisite capacity to create ele-

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ments and write code that uses a breadth of technologies (XML, JavaScript and Flash, and so on), support a host of interactive elements, and deliver rich content through a vibrant experience as unique as the person, product, or place it intends to share.

To provide strategic value, website designers (using the term broadly, to include graphic designers, information architects, user-experience designers, content strategists, writers,

developers, and so on) must be credible. They must understand the business—industry, products, services, processes, audiences, and user needs—deeply. To be noticed, behave well, and excel, the website must be designed to deliver an experience that is approachable, beautiful, and hardworking.

No longer just a front door

It is not the answer that enlightens, but the question.

—Eugene Ionesco, 1909-1994, playwright

Businesses constantly seek new ways to eliminate redundancies, increase efficiencies, streamline processes, and reduce costs. The Internet, which for early adopters was essentially a venue for the distribution of information, is now broadly recognized as a fundamental tool that supports basic business operations, including generating recurring income, increasing the value of assets, and securing the overall value of the organization.

The day when a corporate website served merely as a “virtual front door” is over. Where once “a Web presence” satisfied, designers today must provide a Web business—an experience that delivers everything from product specs and personalization to shopping carts and brand personality. The website's ability to optimize performance and deliver value depends on its

design. The holistic, phased design process—which incorporates analytics, business rules and requirements documentation, usability testing, functionality specifications, visual design, content strategy, development, and testing—is the essential component if the website is to successfully satisfy business requirements by satisfying users.

This holistic design process is also highly collaborative and includes a number of important stages. However, the first stage—definition—may be the most important. To create a website that is beautiful, approachable, and hardworking, designers must understand exactly what the business goals are and what users expect and need if they're to be satisfied. Will the website transfer information through multimedia files and data libraries, or lower call-center volume through FAQs and troubleshooting wizards? Will it present a gallery of gorgeous images and bring a museum to life, or provide a detailed product catalog with a variety of search filters and the ability to select and purchase?

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part of both business clients and their customers continues to rise exponentially. The digital designer must stay ahead of the curve. There's no room for shyness. We must understand all angles of the visual design and the functionality required to deliver it, removing whatever may be in the way of meeting the client's business goals. We

must also exhibit the humility to be challenged and shown new possibilities, of which we may know little or nothing. And finally, we must design with attention to detail—exquisite detail that presents the information in compelling and surprising ways, rendering success through customers who have passed beyond mere satisfaction to delight.

A review of three websites designed and developed by Larsen illustrates these imperatives.

Remove the sharp knives from the drawer: Banner Engineering

However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results.

—Winston Churchill, 1874-1965, statesman

User experience addresses the relationship between a website and its user. All aspects of



BannerEngineering-homeAsian.

website design—from functionality that fits business requirements and the flow of information to the visual design that shapes content and the speed at which it loads—govern usability. Its effectiveness depends on how easily users accomplish tasks. Users who accomplish tasks and are intrigued by the process in any fashion—speed, story, ease of navigation—will be satisfied and likely return.

Simply put, success—gauged through a variety of metrics—is often measured in repeat visits by multiple users. Whatever gets in the way of a user accomplishing a task is a sharp knife.

Banner Engineering is a global manufacturer and distributor of factory and process automation sensors and associated products. The goal of its website redesign was to provide detailed product information to a global audience while deepening brand equity and optimizing search engine results.

We began by developing the site architecture with redefined information paths and industry-standard language. By adjusting nomenclature and modifying navigation to accommodate the variety of user segments and their robust browsing preferences (filtered by industry, application, product types, specifications, literature, accessories, and so on), we enhanced usability.

The company itself was well known within its various locations (Asia, Central and South America, Europe, and the US), but limited by its country-specific impressions, these audiences generally were unaware of Banner's expansive global operations. We added design elements (for example, a global map in the header with a rollover menu of locations that allows users to view country-specific content) and robust corporate content, in particular within the About section, to promote the company's global footprint and to serve its users' many languages.

The ability to serve content in a way that users prefer often requires that the client must get out of the way. As designers, we become the

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guardians of the business goal to the degree that we safeguard user satisfaction. By creating detailed personas, designing an intuitive and logical navigation structure, and benchmarking expectations, we designed an interactive experience that maps to users' desires and reinforces the brand's credibility as a worldwide industry leader.

Since launching, site-usage analytics show a significant increase in new visitors, as well as longer visits on pages that serve robust product information. In addition, customer, sales, and distributor feedback reveal a deeper impression of Banner Engineering's product offerings and competitive advantages.

Clients take us to new places: Best Buy

*Life is the art of drawing without
an eraser.*

—Anonymous

Clients know a lot. They understand their business and customers well; they're often sophisticated users of the Web themselves and know exactly what they like, and why; and they have vision, goals, and high expectations of what their new website must be and what it must do.

Best Buy, a multinational retailer of technology and entertainment products and services, has developed @15, an evolution of the company's established Best Buy Children's Foundation and corporate giving programs. @15 is a visionary, teen-led platform. Best Buy understood this expansive audience, which includes many of its retail store employees and customers, and identified an opportunity to provide a platform for an age group to share its generally untapped opinions and ideas.

The goal was to create a new social networking website for teens: one that provides a venue for sharing hopes, concerns, dreams, and opinions and the tools to participate in social change. In addition, the site design needed to map to the target user audience profile through an experi-

ence that was unique, fresh, and “cool,” and ultimately to serve as a visual framework for the entire @15 platform, which extends far beyond the website.

From the start, there was a lot to learn about this young, sophisticated audience. Its profile includes teens who are active in social networking (Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, and so on). They are smart, connected, and balance a strong sense of hope with a healthy measure of consumer cynicism. Technology is firsthand, and rich media—video, animation, and online interaction—the norm.

For 2009, Best Buy has earmarked \$1 million for non-profit donations through the @15 website (at15.com). This program is a first of its kind: @15 teenage users will determine how the dollars will be awarded. Once registered, a user earns points through online activities—from engaging in discussion boards and playing games to participating in contests and taking the quarterly IMO (In My Opinion) survey, designed to uncover the issues that matter most to teens. The greater the level of participation, the larger number of points earned. Quarterly, users choose where their points (and the foundation’s dollars) are awarded. The beneficiaries are teen-focused, non-profit organizations.

A flexible process to capture expanding requirements through user testing and feedback, coupled with nimble design, accomplished the client’s goal—a meaningful, interactive experience in a format that ably adapts to users’ changing needs and desires. In addition, the site serves opportunities that span education, life skills, leadership, and relationships, allowing teens to become actively involved in their communities and schools, without promoting product or allowing transactions.

Since the site launched, select groups of teens have been given opportunities to attend significant events, including both Democratic and Republican conventions and the 2009 presidential inauguration. Using text, photos, and video,

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event-goers capture and share—online—the event through their perspective. Also, teen traffic and engagement has steadily increased with significant growth in overall awareness and participation by audience members in choosing the beneficiaries of the @15 \$1 million corporate gift.

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that clearly communicate with beauty and intelligence. And clients often surprise us, as well—teaching, or attempting to teach us, new ways of thinking about information, interesting ideas of how it may be displayed, even technologies that are unfamiliar. However, as skilled designers, docility may not be our natural response to clients’ suggestions or insight. At times, we must be willing to set our expertise aside and allow the client to carry the design into the unknown and allow the possibility for an incredible outcome, one that—without their thrust and our trust—we may not otherwise achieve.

**A demand for delight:
Albertsson Hansen Architecture**

When I am working on a problem, I never think about beauty. I only think about how to solve the problem. But when I have finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong.

—Herbert Matter, 1907-1984, architect and designer

Users understand and appreciate the beauty of intelligent design. Businesses understand its benefit to their bottom line. Navigation that is clear and intuitive, design elements that please and engage, and functionality that performs as expected is fast becoming table stakes. A website designed to allow users to accomplish tasks easily and quickly—and find the process enjoyable—is a design that virtually guarantees a return on investment.

It is important to keep in mind that among today’s sophisticated users there is little patience



AlbertssonHansen-home.

for bad typography, boring imagery, messages that are off-brand, or the absence of an overriding concept that conveys the user from entrance to exit. And businesses will tolerate nothing less than a website that performs perfectly. The site cannot get in the way of its goals and the content it is built to deliver.

There is no substitute for the use of foundational design principles—from balance, rhythm, and dominance to proportion, unity, and alignment—which seamlessly translate between the disciplines of print and digital design. By their nature, these principles ensure an optimal user experience. While savvy clients may not understand the design language, they appreciate its value and anticipate the results sound design support. And as the conveyor of impressions that reach a global audience, a website must support the core messages while allowing the business and its offerings to be the star.

Albertsson Hansen Architecture, Ltd., a residential architecture firm offering an array of services from small remodeling projects and new houses to cabins and barns, sought to distinguish itself from other residential architects through a sophisticated, highly visual experience that showcased its portfolio and personality.

An online gallery of images—combining HTML and Flash—was designed to showcase work and encourage exploration. From the home page, users encounter the firm's flexible, scalable portfolio through a slideshow of exquisite photography. Each photograph serves as a portal where users can examine and experience

the personality of the firm through its design: a fieldstone chimney with rough-hewn lumber siding, the sweep of a kitchen countertop that reflects the morning sunlight, a copse of trees through corner windows, or a hidden pantry's floor-to-ceiling vertical drawers.

Filters enable users to query the portfolio in a variety of ways, and print/email capabilities facilitate sharing. Leveraging the firm's library of professionally shot photo-

graphs, it was vital to limit cropping and maintain the photographer's composition choices. Incorporating image zooms to facilitate full vertical and panoramic shots allows users to move into detail as they choose. Flash supports rotating slideshows on both the home and portfolio detail pages, providing a richer presentation of images within the limited space. Subtle transitions support the work, rather than distract; and functionality allows users to pause, as well as move backward and forward, supporting a preferred pace.

Minimal copy—in a direct, thoughtful voice and a tone that conveys clarity and confidence—complements imagery and maintains the gallery modality of “show, don't tell.” A revised architecture and intuitive nomenclature supports search engine optimization, accomplishing the firm's goal of expanding its audience and qualifying leads.

Since the launch of the redesigned site, traffic data confirm users are spending a significant amount of time viewing the online portfolio and history, as well as engaging the Contact Us page—favorable indicators of strategic objectives satisfied.

Learning to listen

By keenly listening to our clients, we learn about their desires and how they create meaningful connections with their customers. By listening to customers, we validate and often clarify what clients assume about them, to reveal detail that affects site structure and design. This two-sided

perspective allows the design to incorporate elements that serve both sides of the conversation, building a rewarding experience that captivates and charms.

It is important to note that unlike print design, where pacing is controlled by order on the page, the rich details that a website provides offer their own sense of pacing (multi-media elements of Flash, video, and so on). The skilled digital designer uses these elements to separate chunks of information from sameness, to cause users to pause and reconnect or carry them into a deeper experience with a surprising detail that captivates, charms, amuses, or entertains. Most visitors appreciate and look for these little surprises, details that gratify.

Website design is in its infancy. We can only imagine what it will be like in five years. However, sound design principles apply, as much today as they have in the past and shall continue in the future. If a website is to attract and satisfy visitors and achieve a measurable return on investment for the business, it must be designed in a rigorous, proven process—one that combines business requirements, functionality, technology, and information architecture with a captivating metaphor, robust content, a focused user experience, and visual design that thrills. Concept, craftsmanship, and execution: There are no substitutes if the designer's goal is to go beyond merely satisfying and aim to delight. ■

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