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It's a car crash out there
By: Alan K'necht (23 Feb 2001)

Recently, I had the opportunity to sit down with some of the world's leading authorities on what makes Web sites effective and what makes them die. The only conclusion that I was able to draw is that it looks like a car crash out there.

There are so many Web sites trying to be everything to everyone, not following Web design standards or Web design conventions. When combined with simply bad information architecture and graphical designs, what most of us experience during our time on-line is more like navigating our way around a series of car wrecks then surfing the Web.

So how did we get here and where do we go from here? While none of the experts would point a finger at a single cause, they did point to some causes and all agreed that skipintro.com (http://skipintro.com) is a great example (spoof) of what not to do.

To stress the point of how bad things are out there, Jared Spool from User Interface Engineering (www.UIE.com) stated that, from his company's studies, "the most effective Web sites are only successful 42 per cent of the time." If only most well-designed sites are effective 42 per cent of time, then how successful is the average site?

Jakob Nielson (www.useit.com) may have isolated the cause. He points out that while there are standards for Web design (as defined by W3.org) and Web design conventions (80 to 90 per cent of Web sites doing the same thing), many designers still prefer to create in a unique way. This leaves the average user lost. For example, simple things like not underlining hypertext while underlining other text leaves the user guessing where to click. Underlining text also goes against typography conventions.

Many designers would simply say that they are expressing themselves and why should they conform to someone else's standards or conventions? Nielson sums it up simply: "To my knowledge, there is no international standard that red means stop and green means go. But can you imagine what would happen at an intersection if someone decided to change that colour convention on their own?"

So when designers start changing the signal light convention of a Web site, they've caused a major traffic accident.

Too many times I've witnessed what happens after a company goes out and hires hotshot Web/graphic designers for tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars to build a Web site. They are all too frequently left with a great looking site that might win awards for its look and feel, but that leaves users lost, never makes a profit and perhaps even tarnishes the reputation of the firm. Fortunately for me, I get called in after the fact to clean up the mess.

So what can you to do to avoid this trap? While I've always emphasized content and structure over flash and cool graphics, the best hope for our future may come from a young designer named Andrew Chak, the manager of user experience design at Derivion.com. He stresses the need to look at how your customer conducts the same business off-line. "If it's not easier, faster, cheaper and with a better experience on-line, then why should your customer do it on-line?" he said.

After absorbing all that I could, I've come to the same conclusion as all the experts. There is no easy way to build a truly effective Web site. All we can do is understand what our audience wants, get them involved as much as possible (focus groups, user testing etc.), build the least obtrusive site possible (keep it simple) and get out of the users way.

The message to all designers out there is also simple: stop designing for your portfolios and start designing for the needs of the users.

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