Chapter V

Effective Web Site Design:
Insight from Information Processing

Deborah E. Rosen, University of Rhode Island, USA
Elizabeth F. Purinton, Marist College, USA
Scott J. Lloyd, University of Rhode Island, USA

Abstract

The Web has been a destination for commerce for well over a decade, so it is time to take stock of what we know, or do not know, about Web design. A review of the literature to date provides evidence that we have really just begun to understand what makes a Web site optimal from a design standpoint. As the Web is first and foremost a source of information, this chapter focuses on Web design from an information processing perspective. Studies are described using cognitive maps and preferences as a possible framework for understanding why some designs are more effective than others in terms of viewers’ likelihood of revisit and overall impression.

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Introduction

The World Wide Web has been available to companies and consumers for over a decade. Whether the purpose of the site is for communication or the actual transacting of business, design should be a common concern for organizations across industries. It is reasonable, therefore, to take a step back at this time and examine what we have learned in terms of Web design.

The challenge is to sift through the research to understand what features contribute to good Web site design and exactly why this is so. If we knew what people liked in a Web site and why they liked it, we would have a better framework for developing effective Web sites than merely having a list of preferred attributes or features. There are numerous how-to guides available from the popular press. Many are based on technical knowledge (what can be done) and the assumption that the Web is like any other print medium (what has been done). But the Web, the only interactive medium, is unlike its two-dimensional print cousins. What we know about information processing in the traditional print arena, therefore, may not translate to this interactive world. Specifically, we need to know why Web visitors like what they like (what should be done).

Through a review of the literature, this chapter sets out to determine exactly what we know in terms of the technical, the Web as a medium, and why Web visitors actually like what they like. Insight is gained from this examination as to areas that require further investigation if we are to maximize the use of this highly unique medium.

What Can Be Done

A review of the literature reveals that progress on the issue of Web site design spans a wide spectrum from how to use graphics to how to optimize your site to get the best search-engine results. Discussed here are only a few of the vast array of topics of the research and handbooks.

The Technical Nature of the Web

There are many technical issues when it comes to Web design. For example, hypertext is central to what makes the Internet different from other print media. Hypertext is characterized as being nonlinear, so the viewer, rather than the