

I.T. DESIGN

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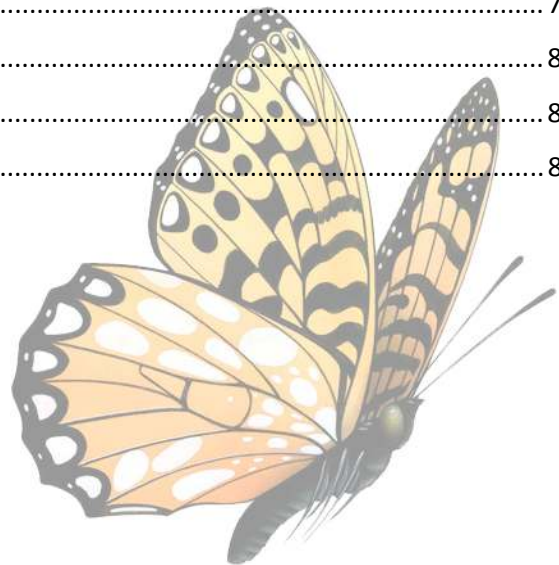
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Guidelines for successful Website Design:

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Planning your Website

OK, so let's get started. Before we do anything, let's make a list of all the things that we'll need to look at and consider in order to build our site. Just like any other major undertaking, there are two basic steps, the plan and the execution. If we concentrate on developing a thorough plan, the execution will be effortless.

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Before we Start

First and foremost, you'll need to define exactly why you want to build a website. I.e., what are you trying to accomplish? Are you building this site in order to create a web presence for your business, or will this website be your business? Is your site going to be an entertainment based website? Are you building your site in order to satisfy your own interest in web design and the internet? Whatever the reasons, you will need to (at least in your own mind) know exactly what they are. This will be extremely important in terms of evaluating your success and determining if your site meets your goals.

Organize the Contents

Second, before you ever touch a PC, you should design your site's layout. So many people jump right into the "doing" without ever thinking about what they are doing. A good way to start is simply by taking a pencil and pad of paper, and roughing out the hierarchical structure of your website. Start with a box for your home page on top, in the row below it, draw a box for every primary topic page, and in the row below that, a box for every subsidiary topic page. When you're done, you'll have something that looks like this:



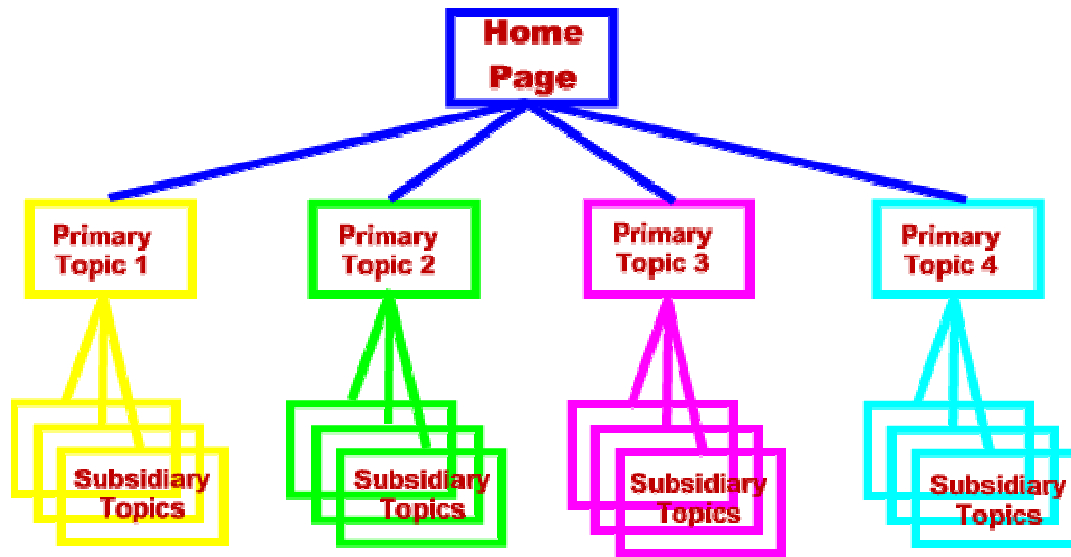
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Model Website

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Let's say, for example, your site is about Pet Care. Your home page would introduce your site, and develop your site's theme and purpose. One way of laying out the site would be to set up the Primary Topic pages by type of pet, e.g., the first primary topic could be Dog Care, the second could be Cat Care, etc. Each of the subsidiary topic pages could then provide categories of information for each pet type, e.g., under the Dog Care primary topic you could have Dog Breeding, Dog Health Tips, Dog Products, Dog diseases and their symptoms, etc. The number of subsidiary pages would of course depend on how deeply you wanted to elaborate on the main topic. Some of your subsidiary pages may end up having their own set of subsidiary pages. For example, the Dog diseases subsidiary page could have a page for each disease. The important thing to keep in mind is that we want to maintain a hierarchical structure. Doing this will help simplify some of the other aspects of website construction. We'll get to those later.

Page Layout

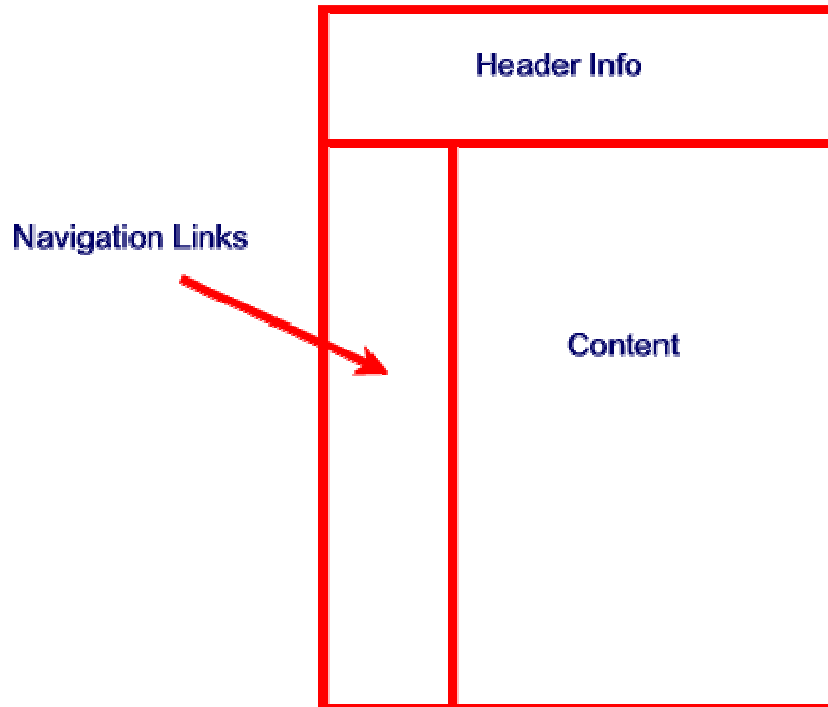
Now that you have a first cut at the structure and layout of your site, you can start doing a rough design of your pages. This is where the fun begins because no single page can be designed in a vacuum. Each page must take into consideration the content of the rest of the pages on your site and the relationships between it and the remaining pages. I feel this is one of the most important considerations in designing your site. Shown below is one of my favorite page layouts.

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My primary reason for recommending this layout is because its basic design makes it relatively easy to set up and maintain. And, it provides a format that accommodates all the attributes that make for a well designed and effective website. If however, you prefer a different layout, that is perfectly fine.

Congratulations...

You have created a basic structure for your website. You know what your site is about, you know how it's going to be laid out, and you know what the basic design of each page will be. But don't start filling in the pages yet. First, let's spend some time talking about the homepage, its purpose, and how to make it effective.

How Effective is Your Homepage

- Does your homepage accomplish what you want it to?
- After seeing your homepage, do your visitors go deeper into the rest of your site? ...or do they assume that this is not what they are looking for and move on to other sites?
- How appealing is your home page?



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When I'm asked about homepage effectiveness, I like to make the following analogy. A website is like a magazine sitting on a newsstand. It's surrounded by other magazines and the only voice it has is its front cover. Every potential buyer coming to that newsstand will initially only see that cover. If that front cover is eye catching, if that front cover has appeal, then a potential reader will pick it out of the rack and quickly scan the content, focusing on those articles that originally caught his/her attention on the front cover. During this process, the potential reader will evaluate the contents against the front cover, making decisions about whether the content lives up to the billing it received on the front cover. If after scanning through the content, the level of interest is still there, then the potential reader may decide to buy a copy.

This in a nutshell, is the way the typical internet surfer views your site. It typically starts with a query on their favorite search engine, which brings up a list of possible matches (the newsstand). If one of the entries on that list catches the surfer's attention, then that will merit a quick (10 second or less) look at your home page. These first 10 seconds are the most critical in terms of the surfer/site relationship. If the home page catches the surfers interest, he/she will look inside. If not, he'll move on to another site almost faster than your server can log the hit.

Two Goals of an Effective Homepage

New visitors coming to your site via a search engine are usually looking for something specific. If the link that brought them to you accurately summarized your services, then the home page should be an extension of that presentation. An effective home page needs to accomplish two goals.

First, it needs to introduce and develop your site's theme or purpose. It needs to answer the question "what is this site all about"? Development of a theme is the most important element of a strong home page because the theme is the element that defines your site's purpose and content. Your home page is the first "look" your visitors see about your website or business and is often the determining factor as to whether a visitor stays or leaves. If the theme is developed and presented well, your visitors will know immediately if they came to the right place. Not all visitors will want exactly what your site has to offer. However, for those who do, it is critical to make sure they realize that your site can satisfy their needs. For new visitors, your home page should answer the following questions:

- What is this site all about?
- What does this site offer?
- How close of a match are my needs with this site's offerings?

Your home page is the most important page on your site. It is the first page your visitors see. For this reason, I strongly believe that when designing a home page, you should try to answer the question "What is the single most important thing that I want new visitors to my site to know about my site (or business)?" Your home page should be built around the answer to that question.



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After you've established your theme or purpose, the second most important goal of an effective homepage is to present your site's position statement. A position statement will tell your visitors *what you can do for them*. It gives them an idea of the benefits and/or services you offer with a focus on value. Somehow, you need to convince your visitors that your site is better than all the other sites that have the same theme. The key word is "value". Your home page needs to clearly define whatever it is that makes your site better than the rest of the pack. Why should your visitors buy that widget from you instead of the site next door?

Just When you thought it was tough

The challenging part is that you need to accomplish all of the above in the top 10 centimetres of your homepage. Why the top 10 centimetres? Because regardless of your visitor's browser and screen resolution, that is the only area on each page that you are guaranteed your visitor will see. If the top 10 centimetres don't convince your visitor that your site is the one he is looking for, he will probably never see the rest of your site.

You're now ready to start designing your home page. As you create your home page layout, try to keep the above information in mind. The key word for homepage design is "Effectiveness". In order to be effective, it needs to grab your visitor's attention.

As mentioned in The Planning Phase, a hierarchical website has three page types; the home (or main) page, primary topic pages and subsidiary topic pages.

The navigational structure of a well structured site should have the following seven attributes:

- A visitor should always have an awareness of where they are in your site
- Consistency. The appearance and location of your links should be the same across your entire site
- Page names (xxx.htm) should be similar to your navigation link names
- Before clicking on a link, a visitor should have a good idea of where that link will take them
- The home page should contain links to all primary topic pages.
- Each primary topic page should contain links to the other primary topic pages and to that topic's subsidiary pages (if there are any).
- Each subsidiary page should contain links to the other subsidiary pages within that primary topic, and to all the other main topic pages.

Typically your site will receive two kinds of visitors. First and most common are the ones that enter through the home page and see your site the way you intended it to be seen. The other

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kind of visitor is the one that drop in at one of the lower level pages as the result of clicking on a search engine link. Don't be fooled, one may seem slightly easier to satisfy than the other, but they both have their challenges.

Visitors that Start at the Home Page

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The visitor starting at your home page has greater expectations. Because he/she is starting at the beginning, they expect your navigational structure to lead them to their particular area of interest without confusion or misdirection. For that reason, your link names must accurately represent the contents of the target page. Anything less will frustrate and confuse your visitor and possibly give them enough reason to leave.

Choose the Right Names

When naming your links, review your target page and look for no more than three key words that summarize the contents of that page. These don't necessarily have to be words on that page, they just need to create an accurate expectation. Also, whatever name you choose for your link, be sure to choose something similar for that page's URL name. I.e., don't call your link "The Bookstore" and then name your page "Page14.htm".

Give Each Page a Title

What better way to reinforce that the contents of the destination page matches the link that took you there, than to use a descriptive title (on the destination page) that matches the link name. A page title in a type larger than the rest of the text on a page will be one of the first things a visitor sees when arriving at the page. If nothing else, it will give your visitors a warm fuzzy feeling to know that they arrived at the right place.

Be Consistent

One of the most frustrating experiences on the web is trying to navigate a site where the navigational structure changes on each page. Whatever you decide on, whether it's a horizontal menu at the top of your pages, or a vertical menu down the left side of your pages, MAKE SURE IT'S THE SAME ON EVERY PAGE. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule, especially when it comes to large sites like Yahoo or MSN, but most of us won't ever have to worry about managing a website that is that complex. Keep it simple, so that your visitors don't have to think, and you'll have happy visitors.

Another exception to the consistency rule is your home page. Your home page has a totally different purpose (as discussed in our previous newsletter) and therefore does not have to adhere to the site's navigational structure. However, the home page should

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contain links to all the primary topic pages. The last thing you want a visitor to do is to arrive at a primary topic page and see links to other primary topic pages that weren't on the home page. You don't want them saying to themselves "Where did that come from?" My philosophy behind a good navigational structure and link naming convention is **No Surprises**.

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Take Me Home

For those visitors that enter your site in the middle, a really handy way of establishing orientation is the link to the home page. In fact, I would go so far as to say that every page on your site **MUST** have a link to the home page. It gives your visitors a way of starting from scratch. Lately, more and more sites are using their logo's to link back to the home page, and web surfers are quickly becoming accustomed to finding the home page link there.

I Can't Find What I'm Looking For

If your site has lots of content, you should certainly consider adding a site search engine. Not only will it accelerate finding something specific on your site, but it will also verify that you site does contain the sought after information. Sometimes, looking for something specific on a large site can be like looking for a needle in a haystack. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to query the haystack and find out if this is the one with the needle?

In Conclusion

I really believe that good website aesthetics is mostly common sense. If something doesn't feel right, chances are you shouldn't add it to your site.

