

INTERFACE *and* NAVIGATION

“Interface is the way your site presents itself to the user. Interface design is responsible for creating a strong subjective impression as well as an easily understood overview of how it all works. Ideally, a strong interface seamlessly melds navigational tools and the graphic identity that gives a Web site its character.”

—Darci Dinucci, *Elements of Web Design*

“In interactive documents graphic design cannot be separated from issues of interface design.”
—Web Style Guide

“Interface design isn’t about icons and buttons any more than graphic design is about typefaces and bleeds. They are both about creating experiences and communicating emotions and information.”—Nathan Shedroff, *Vivid Studios*

Part 1: Before you design

Interface and Navigation work hand in hand. First, let’s consider the factors that affect the interface design. The interface is the driving force behind both the structural and the graphic design decisions of a site.

Content

Organize the content and listen: the material will tell you what design suits it best!

Use the material of the site—the content—to help determine the design of the site. This is what I call “organic design,” you respond to the content, the content responds to your attention and care, and the design grows out of that interaction. Create a plan for the site and a site map to get a “visual” of the layout. Get that “To Do” list going!

Give examples of how content can give rise to interface design.

Audience

It’s so easy to get lost in design for design’s sake, or caught up entertaining the audience with the latest and greatest tricks you’ve learned!

The “audience” should factor into every aspect of web design: not only who the audience is, but where and when they will be accessing the site and how much time they will spend.

What questions should you ask about your audience when designing the interface?

Format

Condemned to design in a world where one size fits all! Thank gawd for bells and whistles that designers can play with!

800 x 600! We talk about how limiting HTML is—what about the horizontal format and screen size we’re stuck with? **First rule:** design at least the home page to fit onscreen without any scrolling whatsoever. Think: one-size surfing. **Rule 2:** don’t offer too many choices, generally not more than seven. Long lists of choices are overwhelming and do not encourage browsing. **Rule 3:** think like your user. For example, where might the user want to go next?

Any ideas to make 800 x 600 feel different than the next designer’s 640 x 460?

Appropriateness

Watch that technobabble! Don't litter your site with words outside of the user's vocabulary!

Whatever the interface, be certain that it is appropriate for the target audience! Functionality, ease of use to both the new and seasoned user, language, graphics, etc., should all be geared towards the average user.

What issues come to mind when considering appropriateness?

Function/Purpose

Be sure to understand what the client wants the web site to do—and be sure to design towards that purpose!

What method must you use to ascertain the client's purpose? What methods can you utilize to keep your design on track?

Structure & Growth

I love the concept of "in process," that unlike print graphics, a web site remains forever malleable.

Plan ahead and leave room for the site to grow and change. Create navigation bars that can be added to without distress or 80 hours of work!

"The contents of a web site will—or should change constantly...Planning and designing a web site is therefore a lot like creating a new magazine. Content planners must think in terms of content categories ("departments"), not specific content, when planning the site's sections. This factor affects the interface as well as the structural design of a site. Designers should think in terms of rules, or templates, for styling the content, thinking ahead to the uses to which each element might be put. That's not to say that new features can't have their own individual design, but as with a magazine, the site's graphic identity should remain constant while the specific content changes."

—Darci Dinucci, Elements of Web Design

In what ways can you allow for growth and change in a web site?

What other questions are useful in the design planning stage?

Part 2: The Personality and Practicality of a Site

Remember, overdoing anything is nauseating. Cute and friendly icons become patronizing after a while.

Interface and Navigation play two roles: they help to create the personality of the site and they are the functionality of the site. Let's talk personality first.

Site personality

Use the material of the site to decide what kind of personality the site should have. If possible, find a visual theme that represents the overall content and carry that throughout the site. The Harley Davidson site "roars," the Belthor furniture site uses woodworking tools as navigation icons.

Give examples of sweet and obnoxious site personalities.

Metaphor and Theme

Creating an environment is more work than designing a straight-up site, but allows for plenty of creativity.

The user interface design should provide a structure and an environment that best communicates the content. A designer can employ a metaphor to give the user an experience to which s/he can relate. David Seigel recommends metaphor (visual theme) to entice and guide users. It can be difficult and impractical to take the metaphor approach to every layer of a site.

Explore some metaphor/theme ideas:

Functionality (see next page: Designing for Navigational Ease)

Simplicity and consistency are easier to achieve than transparency and anticipation!

Less is more: don't clutter the screen.

Consistency: the key to user confidence and trust.

Three steps away: don't bury links too deeply.

Transparency: a good interface may be nearly invisible!

Anticipation: creates a more dynamic experience.

What techniques help to create a transparent interface?

How could you create a dynamic experience for the user?

DESIGNING *for* NAVIGATIONAL EASE

If you can easily find your way around a site and find your way back to the home page at any time from any page, the navigation is well organized. The focus of good navigation is organization, not graphics. Navigation should always be user-friendly.

Styles: personality and function combined

Clear and simple should be the primary concerns. Creative and clever are cool but may get in the way of navigation!

What types of navigation elements are used?

What aids clear navigation?

What impairs navigation?

CRAP

You want to design a site in which the user is visually engaged and feels at home in a familiar, cozy kind of way.

All the design principles apply: contrast, repetition, alignment and proximity, as well as and most importantly, consistency.

Style aside, keep navigation elements in one compact place: at the top, bottom, or off to the side. If you have a long page, keep it at top and at bottom. Include text links by providing an “alternate label” for the graphics to accommodate older browsers or text-only surfers.

How can we combine creative design, user-friendliness, and familiarity?

Where am I?

Consistently give the user a clue as to what page they are currently on (fade icon of current page, or unlink it, or triangle pointing to icon, etc.).

What techniques can you use to provide “you are here” clues?

Multiple ways to navigate

If you provide the user with multiple ways to get around the site you are sure to have a method that appeals to all types of users. See the “Home Sweet Home Page” example on page 137 in The Non-Designer’s Web Book.

Site Map

A site map is a graphic representation of the site; a diagram that shows the site organization and the structure of the page links. Clicking on one of the pages in this diagram will take you to the actual page. Site maps can really help users understand the overall structure of a site and discover the particular page they are looking for.

Got any creative ideas for multiple navigation and/or site map layout?

Selective Linking

Is there anything worse than waiting for a page to draw and finding that you didn't really need to follow that link?

Links distract the user (don't want to miss anything!) and detract from readability (contrast where you don't need it). So provide links wisely.

Internal links: within the site, always provide a way back.

External links: connect to outside sites. At least make them open in a new window so your site stays on the screen (add: target = "_blank" to the end of the A HREF tag). It helps even more if you can open a smaller window using Javascript.

Irritating Links

Three useful guidelines: 1. Check to be sure the links are still working; 2. Make a link worth jumping to; 3. Avoid barely relevant links.

Testing your site

Watch someone free roam the site, note where they go first and ask why they made the choices they did.

Give a mission to accomplish: find "x" (article, graphic, etc) and see how long it takes them to find it.

Be open to user feedback during the testing phase.

User-testing companies will actually videotape people interacting with a web site or multimedia presentation in order to see exactly what happens. Studies have shown that users will surf differently when they are being observed -- videotaped user-testing is thought to be much more realistic.

What other ways could you determine how user-friendly the interface is?

Can you think of any other interface and navigation concepts worth discussing