User Experience – Information, Interaction & Visual Design

Customer-Centred Web Design

After creating an initial structure for your website, which has come from careful planning, the next step in your strategy is to start planning the design. You will find decisions regarding the design of your website easier if you have been thorough in your ground work, that is if you are clear about the objectives of your site and you have a detailed user profile for your target audience or audiences. Remember - the most effective web designer is an informed web designer.

To create an effective website – one that is successful in fulfilling the objectives and has your audience returning to your website, you must design with your audience in mind. Your design will be driven by your audience – you will take a customer centred design approach.

What is customer-centred design?

Customer centred design means that your website will provide a positive experience for all customers. To be able to take this approach you have to empathize with customers, understanding their needs, the tools and technologies they use and their social and organisational context.

Although this may seem obvious, this has not always been the case in the development of the Web.

Evolution of Web Design

In his book *Creating Killer Websites*, David Siegel defines the evolution of web design as generational.

The First Generation

First generation websites were linear. They were functional for scientists around the world to share information. Pages displayed a left to right, top to bottom sequence of text and images reflecting the restrictions imposed by the technology at the time – slow modems, monochrome monitors.

First Generation Web Site

Here's a first generation website. Ugly gray, with default characters and headings in Times Roman. Of course, the site can be functional, but it won't attract anyone. Back in 1994-95, such a site was King of the Mountain. Not today.

Back to "The Lights Are On" article

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The Second Generation

As the web grew in popularity, organisations realised the potential of the web as a marketing tool. "Advertise that you sell it online and they will come" became the catchcry of this generation. This marks the beginning of what is known as the 'dotcom boom' of the late 1990's. Organisations were building interactive computer interfaces for their products and services.

Web technologies were becoming more advanced and second generation websites, according to Siegel, were driven by the development of html. This was the time that the major browsers introduced their proprietary extensions (the Browser Wars).

Second generation websites, says Siegel, introduced icons (replacing some text), buttons with bevelled edges, bulleted lists and tiled background images (wasn't that an improvement…).

These websites were technology driven, but developers did not really think through how compelling or easy it was for their customers. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the dot com bust, by 2000.

The Third Generation

Third generation websites are driven by design, not technological competence, giving the audience a complete experience (Siegel:1997 p15). They are more visually sophisticated driven by specific branding and marketing objectives of the organisation, to attract and communicate to an audience.

At the time of writing, Siegel was arguing that there were only a handful of websites that were third generation. There has been much debate since regarding what defines a fourth generation website. Some say it includes the dynamic experience of databases, others say personalisation, or multimedia-rich sites (Zastrow:para2), all of which could be referred to as Web 2.0. The next generation of web design incorporates 'web 2.0' characteristics such as communication, collaboration, interaction, information sharing and is driven by customer-centred design.

Customer-centred Design

What are some of the reasons why a customer would leave a website?

What are some of the reasons why you leave a website without finding what you are there for?

- frustration
- it's too much effort to navigate the site
- can't find the product or service they are looking for
- get big surprises they don't like
- feel it takes too long to load

Web Design

Let's just have a look at this word Design…

According to Nathan Shedroff, "Design is a set of fields for problem-solving, that uses user-centric approaches to understand user needs to create successful solutions that solve real problems. … [T]he larger definition for Design operates at a higher level and across many media." (Shedroff)

In web design you might see a number of different terms used for design:

- Information design
- Interface design (including navigation design)
- Interaction design
- Graphic/Visual design

Information Design

Information design, or information architecture is an approach to designing clear, understandable communications by giving care to structure, context, and presentation of data and information. As a field, its principles relate to all communications products and experiences, regardless of medium (print, broadcast, digital, online, etc.).

Information Design is, primarily, concerned with clarity (instead of simplicity) and understanding.

Interface Design

Interface is the visual layout of content and interactive controls that lets the user interact with the program.

User interface design is the design of computers, appliances, machines, mobile communication devices, software applications, and websites with the focus on the user's experience and interaction.

The goal of user interface design is to make the user's interaction as simple and efficient as possible, in terms of accomplishing user goals—what is often called user-centered design.

Navigation design is the specialised form of interface design for presenting information spaces (Garrett, 2002:114), particularly online spaces. In web production, navigation design really sits within interface design.

Interaction Design

Interaction Design is a field and approach to designing interactive experiences. These could be in any medium (such as live events or performances, products, services, etc.), not only digital media.

Interactive Design is concerned with a user, customer, audience, or participant's experience flow through time.

Interactivity is concerned with being part of the action of a system or performance and not merely watching the action passively.

Graphic or Visual Design

Visual or Graphic Design is the field of developing visual materials to create an experience spanning the fields of Illustration, Typography, Layout, Colour Theory, Iconography, Signage, Photography, etc. Visual design is used in any medium, including online, broadcast, print, outdoor, etc. It is concerned with the elements of visual expression and style, and is an integral step in Information Design and other communication design disciplines.

http://www.nathan.com/ed/glossary/index.html
http://www.wikipedia.org

All of these designs have to be working well for a website to function efficiently and effectively. Your website will lose valuable customers if it looks beautiful, but they cannot find what they are looking for. The boundaries between these different design practices tend to blur together, particularly if you are working in a small team (or one person).

Jesse James Garrett states that the three design practices that are the most closely bound are interface design, navigation design and information design.

Interface design

- providing users with the ability to do things

  "Interface design for the web is all about selecting the right interface elements for the task the user is trying to accomplish and arranging them on the page in a way that will be readily understood and easily used." (Garrett, 2002:120)

Navigation design

- providing users with the ability to go places

  Navigation design must provide users with a means for getting from one point to another on a site. The links must make sense to the user and they must work. The labelling on your navigation must make sense and it must take your users to information they are expecting. (Garrett, 2002:115)

Information design

- involves communicating ideas to users

  Information design is about making decisions about how to present information so that people can use it or understand it more easily. (Garrett, 2002:131)

  It's about grouping or arranging pieces of information, which can sometimes inform the structure of your site and incorporate navigation design. Information design can also be visual for example presenting information in a pie chart, breaking text up into paragraphs creating white space (which is more inviting when reading large amounts of text). The key is to group and arrange information elements in ways that reflect how your users think and support their tasks and goals. (Garrett, 2002:134)

Nathan Shedroff also gives importance to interaction in his discussions about online experiences, or what he calls information interaction design (the convergence of the three design disciplines information design, interaction design and sensorial design (visual etc).

Interactive Design

What is Interactivity?

Interactivity is the combination of different types of media into a digital presentation that allows the user some degree of interaction. Interactivity gives the audience new opportunities to control how they receive information, and encourages an active audience rather than a passive one.

In other media forms such as film, the audience observes the storyline (not always in a linear fashion) but they cannot alter the outcome of the story. The audience of an interactive document can change the speed, pacing, and other information. The audience can choose to explore or ignore.

The important thing to remember is there are many design components that come together in the creation of a website to create a meaningful experience for the user. When you are thinking about the design of your website the designs you need to think about are information, interface/navigation, interaction and visual design.

Web Design

In his website 'Websites that suck' Vincent Flanders outlines a checklist of design mistakes that web designers are still making.

All web navigation must answer these questions:

Where am I?

Where have I been?

Where can I go next?

Where's the Home Page?

Where's the Home Home Page?

http://www.webpagesthatsuck.com/biggest-mistakes-in-web-design-1995-2015.html

Navigation must be simple and consistent.

Check out the website and the contenders for 2012.
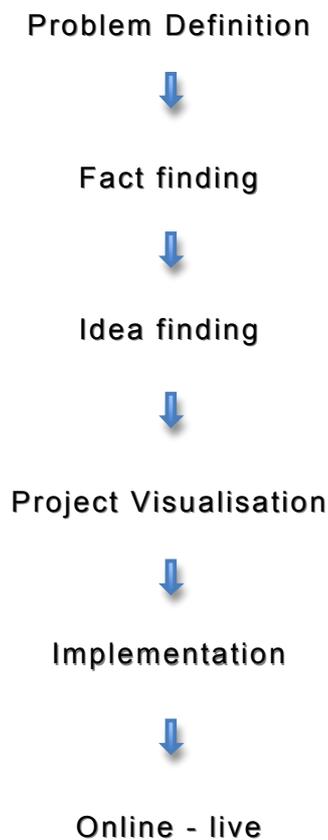http://www.webpagesthatsuck.com/dailysucker/

A successful website design depends on…

- simple, clearly defined goals

- a strong message, presented clearly

- an intuitive interface (one that is easy to understand and navigate)

- a firm knowledge of effective screen layout

- a firm knowledge of the audience's playback technology

The Design process

These are the steps to take to help you move successfully through the design process.

Problem Definition

⬇

Fact finding

⬇

Idea finding

⬇

Project Visualisation

⬇

Implementation

⬇

Online - live

Problem Definition

Examine

- goals & objectives

- target audience

- define format

This is all background information, where you start to broadly scope your project.

Fact finding

- learning client's needs and requirements

- research other projects with similar goals & objectives

- pin-point technological limitations that effect design

- choose the tools

- determine the skills needed

- flowchart

This is the follow up to the Problem Definition, where you start to research in more detail. You determine how you are practically going to build the site – the tools that you need and that are available to you, the skills you need and the skills you have.

Once all this information has been gathered a preliminary flowchart of the project can be developed. This information informs your proposal and ultimately the production of your project.

Idea Finding

- start searching for a visual layout

- start searching for ideas on navigation

- thumbnails and roughs

You can now start to work on the visual look of your site.

Project Visualisation

- development of design

- critical evaluation of roughs

- start to refine designs and navigation

Implementation

This is the stage where the storyboards/sample screens are translated into a functional interactive project.

(Graham, 1999:2-17)

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