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Taking Your Talent to the Web
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chapter 6

What Is a Web Designer, Anyway?

WE'VE EXPLORED THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS of the Web as a unique medium; considered architecture and navigation as key components of the user experience; glanced at the medium's history; defined technical terms; and examined the roles played by your coworkers. Maybe it's time to look at *your* job on the Web. We'll start with a working definition.

Definition

Web designers are professionals who solve a client's communication problems and leverage the client's brand identity in a web-specific way.

Complementing this focus on the client's needs, web designers must think like the site's anticipated audience. They foresee what visitors will want to do on the site and create navigational interfaces that facilitate those needs.

Pretty dry stuff, we'll grant you, but like marital bliss, it's better than it sounds.

How does all this fancy talk break down in terms of daily tasks? Below is a summary of deeds you'll do during the web development project life cycle. In Chapter 7, "Riding the Project Life Cycle," we delve into details.

Through the project life cycle, the web designer will need to:

- **Understand and discuss** the underlying technology—its possibilities and limitations as well as related issues—with clients and team members.
- **Translate** *client* needs, content, and branding into structured website concepts.
- **Translate** projected *visitor* needs into structured website concepts.
- **Translate** website concepts into appropriate, technically executable color comps.
- **Design** navigation elements.
- **Establish** the look and feel of web pages, including typography, graphics, color, layout, and other factors.
- **Render** design elements from Photoshop, Illustrator, and other visual development environments into usable elements of a working website.
- **Lay out** web pages and sites using HTML and other web development languages.
- **Organize and present** content in a readable, well-designed way.
- **Effectively participate** on a web development team.
- **Modify** graphics and code as needed (for instance, when technological incompatibilities arise or when clients' business models change—as they often do in this business).
- **Program** HTML, JavaScript, and style sheets as needed. In larger agencies, this work is often performed by web developers and technicians (see Chapter 5, "The Obligatory Glossary"), but the accomplished web designer must be ready to do any or all of these tasks as needed.
- **Try not to curse** browser makers, clients, or team members, as obstacles are encountered throughout the process. (Well, go ahead and curse browser makers if you want to.)

- **Update and maintain** client sites as needed. Though this job, too, often falls to web technicians or producers, don't think you're off the hook. You're never off the hook.

What We Have Here Is an Opportunity to Communicate

The work of web design involves understanding what your clients wish to achieve, helping them refine their goals by focusing on things that can be done (and are worth doing), and ultimately translating those goals into working sites.

While interacting with clients, you're also interfacing with research and marketing folks to find out who is expected to visit the site and what they will demand of it. You'll be translating the anticipated needs of projected visitors into functional and attractive sites—and hoping that visitors want what your client wants them to want. (Try saying that with a mouthful of peanut butter.)

If visitors seek in-depth content, but your client envisioned the site mainly as a sales channel, either the client has fundamentally misunderstood his market (it happens), or your design is sending the wrong messages. To build sites that clearly convey what they are about and how they are to be used, you must first communicate unambiguously with clients, marketers, and researchers.

The site can't communicate unless the people who build it communicate. Ever try to design a logo for a client who could not articulate the target market, product benefits, or desired brand attributes? The same problems crop up in web design unless you are blessed with great clients or are willing to work with the ones you have. Listening may be the most important talent you possess. If your listening skills have grown rusty, you'll have plenty of meetings in which to polish them.

Good web designers are user advocates as well as client service providers. They are facilitators as well as artists and technicians. Above all, they are *communicators*, matching client offerings to user needs.

As designers, we often look down on clients for reacting according to their personal taste ("I don't like bold type") instead of viewing the work through the eyes of their intended market ("That's just what our customers are looking for"). But web designers commit the same offenses. Some of us become so enamored of our aesthetic and technical skills that we end up talking to ourselves or sending encoded visual messages to our fellow web designers.

As a design professional, you are presumably free of this affliction most of the time. (If not, you'd have found some other line of work by now). Retain that focus (Who am I talking to? What are they looking for?) as you pick up the tools of your new trade. If you emphasize communication above all other goals, you will find yourself enjoying a significant competitive advantage. You'll also design better sites.

Let's expand our definition of the web designer's role.

Definition (Revised)

A web designer is responsible for the look and feel of business-to-business and business-to-consumer websites. Web designers solve their clients' communication problems, leveraging brand identity in a web-specific manner (in other words, in a manner that respects the limitations and exploits the strengths of the Web). A web designer understands the underlying technology and works with team members and clients to create sites that are visually and emotionally engaging, easy to navigate, compatible with visitors' needs, and accessible to a wide variety of web browsers and other devices.

The Definition Defined

Let's break this definition into its components:

> A web designer is responsible for the look and feel of business-to-business and business-to-consumer websites.

Look and feel

Just as in print advertising, editorial work, and graphic design work, the look and feel reflects the client's brand, the intended audience, and the designer's taste. Is the site intended for preteenage comic book fans? Is it

a music site for college students? An entertainment site? A corporate site? An informational or shopping site for a wide, general audience? Is it intended to reach an international visitorship? Or just people from Ohio? (Is visitorship a word?)

As with any design assignment, you first find out all you can about the client's brand and the audience the client intends to reach and then make appropriate decisions. The terrain will be familiar to you. It includes choosing typefaces, designing logos, selecting or creating illustrations or photographs, developing a color palette, and so on. As we discussed in Chapter 2, "Designing for the Medium," these familiar tasks change a bit when applied to the Web because the medium embraces certain things (flat color fields, text) while hiccuping on others (full-screen graphics, high-resolution images and typography).

More significantly, "look and feel" decisions extend beyond traditional graphic design and art direction to encompass site-wide navigational architecture (as discussed in Chapter 3, "Where Am I? Navigation & Interface"). Technological issues play their part as well. A site in which database queries generate results in HTML tables will have a different look and feel than a more traditional content site, or one created in Macromedia Flash. The technological choice does not *dictate* the look and feel: It can be any kind of HTML table-based layout, any kind of text layout, or any kind of Flash-based design. The choice of technology merely establishes parameters.

Business-to-business

Business-to-business means one company communicating with another or selling to another. Annoying dot-com types and techno-journalists refer to this as *B2B*.

The B2B category includes intranet sites (the private, company site of Ogilvy & Mather or Pepsi Cola) and extranets (a steel company's site linked to a broker's site linked to the sites of five customers). Flip back to Chapter 5 if these terms make you edgy. Though this part of the web business is hidden from most folks, it is vast and growing. There's no doubt that in your web career, you'll be asked to design some B2B sites. You'll also have to avoid slapping people who say "B2B."

In fact, we'd like to apologize right here for using acronyms such as B2B and B2C. They annoy us as much as they do you. But you might as well get used to them because you'll be hearing them constantly at your job. Besides, as annoying as these acronyms are, they're not nearly as nerve-wracking as ubiquitous venture capitalist phrases such as "burn rate," "built to flip," or "ad-sponsored community play."

We've never understood why these phrases arise, let alone how those who talk that way manage to avoid being beaten with large polo mallets on a daily basis. Our theory is that such phrases make the speakers feel important. As you can probably tell, we didn't have much to say about the business-to-business category because, basically, web design is web design regardless of the acronym attached to a particular category. Vanilla, chocolate, or strawberry—ice cream is ice cream, Jack. (But do look back at Chapters 2 and 5 for hints on coping with intranet-design-specific issues).

Business-to-consumer

When most folks think of the Web, they form a mental picture of business-to-consumer sites such as Amazon.com—a business that sells products to consumers like us. Not all B2C sites are overtly hawking products. Yahoo.com is a B2C site. Yahoo! (the business) provides web users with information. It isn't selling anything per se, but it's still B2C because it speaks to consumers and is open to all. It's not hidden on a private network and password-protected, as a B2B site would be. The B2C segment is the most visible part of the web. (We apologize for using the word "segment.")

Solve Communication Problems

Let's continue with the next part of the job description:

> Web designers solve their clients' communication problems, leveraging brand identity in a web-specific manner (in other words, in a manner that respects the limitations and exploits the strengths of the Web).

Using HTML to lay out web pages does not make you a web designer—nor does making pretty pictures in Photoshop. A web designer, like any other designer, is a communications professional who solves problems. Just as a CD cover says something about the music it contains, the band that created the music, and the likely customer, so the site must clearly communicate its structure, content, and purpose in a way appropriate to a specific audience.

Gosh, haven't we made this point before? Yes we have. And yet many web designers will read these words, nod their heads sagely (or maybe just nod off), and then continue to create sites whose appearance has nothing to do with the product, user, or brand.

Brand identity

As a designer or art director, you know what this means. But what does it mean on the Web? In simplistic terms, and on the most basic level, it means the same kind of work you've done all your professional life: *Make the logo bigger. Use the client's color palette.*

But on a deeper level, the web designer doesn't merely "use the client's colors" and slap the client's logo on a web page. The web designer *uses the site to express and extend the client's brand identity.*

In Chapter 3 we discussed the way IBM's brand positioning as a solutions company influenced not only the site's look and feel, but also the depth and nature of its architecture and the type of enabling technology employed in its construction (see Figure 6.1). Good web designers are always thinking beyond the surface, extending and translating the brand through function as well as form.

Web-specific

No surprises here. In the case of the IBM site, "leveraging brand identity in a web-specific manner" means designing a site that provides solutions, not problems. Clear navigation and a search engine that works help the site support this aspect of the brand. This is an example of using the Web's strength as a searchable database to convey brand attributes.

Figure 6.1

Did the designers of IBM's website (www.ibm.com) succeed in their quest to translate the IBM brand to the Web? Front-page graphics tell only part of the story. The site's functional performance tells the rest. Web design encompasses graphic design but extends beyond it.

Restrictions of the Medium

Every medium has limitations. This book, for instance, lacks hyperlinks and a soundtrack. You can't bookmark a motion picture (at least, not in the theater—the management might complain), and you can't save printed magazine images to your desktop (though you can often save newsprint to your fingertips).

The Web's restrictions, as well as its strengths, were discussed in Chapter 2. Respecting those limitations and playing to those strengths is a key difference between design and *web* design. A web page that ignores the medium's restrictions (for instance, by forcing the viewer to download 100K of bloated imagery) or that fails to play to the medium's strengths (for instance, by offering limited interactivity), may be visually beautiful—but it will still be poor web design.

Let's look at the last part of our definition:

> A web designer understands the underlying technology and works with team members and clients to create sites that are visually and emotionally engaging, easy to navigate, compatible with visitors' needs, and accessible to a wide variety of web browsers and other devices.

Technology

Web designers have a lot to say about the appropriate technological level for sites they design. Choosing appropriate technology is part of your job as brand steward and user advocate. Consider the following:

- You wouldn't design a general shopping site that depended on the visitor having the Flash plug-in, the latest version of Internet Explorer, or a particular operating system because you'd lose many customers that way. The owners of Boo.com, a technologically overwrought shopping site, learned this the hard way when their business imploded in 2000.

- On the other hand, when designing a gaming site for Playstation or an entertainment site for a high-tech sci-fi flick, using Flash (or designing for newer, more capable browsers) could be entirely appropriate.

- You or a developer on your team might have fun coming up with a nifty *Dynamic HTML* (DHTML) menu geared for Internet Explorer 5, Netscape 6, and Opera 5—three recent browsers that to greater or lesser degrees support the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) standard Document Object Model (DOM). You would not create a menu like that, however, for a women's health care center because patients and their families are not going to download a new browser when seeking medical help or information.

Technology choices are essentially decisions about who the site is for. As a communications professional, you should cultivate an informed opinion on this matter. If you don't decide these issues for yourself, somebody else will decide for you, which can have potentially tragic results.

It's also worth repeating that even if you decide the site is primarily for bleeding-edge web enthusiasts, you will want to create alternative pages that are accessible to anyone.

Works with team members

Although sites are often driven by a lead designer and technologist (or a lead information designer), web design is nearly always a group effort. Think of your team members as friends. In fact, think of them as family. You'll probably see more of them than you do your friends and family anyway. Then again, as a designer, you may already be used to that.

Visually and emotionally engaging

Like we have to define this for you.

Like that ever stopped us.

Beyond functioning appropriately for its intended use and supporting the brand, if your site lacks visual appeal or a coherent and engaging message, all but the most dedicated users will pass it by in favor of a more fulfilling experience elsewhere.

"Form follows function" does not mean "form doesn't matter." Form matters a heck of a lot. Given two functionally equivalent sites, only one of which delights the eye, where would you choose to spend your time? Okay, you're a designer. But given the same two sites, where would your Aunt Martha choose to spend her time? Okay, well, yes, we forgot about Aunt Martha's problem. Anyway, you get the idea.

Visually appropriate does not mean visually unengaging. Most of the screenshots in Chapter 3 are of appropriately designed sites, very few of which are lackluster or emotionally unappealing. We adopt kittens but run from buzzards and rats because, well, to be honest, because buzzards and rats are filthy, disgusting animals—but also because kittens are cuter than buzzards and rats. We idolize babies and movie stars for much the same reason.

You did not go into design to make the world duller or uglier. Anyone who tells you a functional site has to be visually plain is suffering from an emotional problem. Don't make their problem yours. (But don't give them ammunition by designing a beautiful but hard-to-use site.)

Sites cannot be emotionally engaging if they don't have a clear purpose and a distinctive, brand-appropriate look and feel. It also helps a great deal if they're well written. Few commercial sites are. If you end up supervising budgets for some of your projects, be sure to leave money for good writers and editors. Great cinematography can only go so far when the script is bad.

Easy to navigate

Refer to Chapter 3.

Compatible with visitors' needs

Refer to this chapter's previous discussion of the three partners in any website (the designer, the client, and the end-user) and to Chapter 3, which covers scenario development as a means of getting inside the user's head.

We get inside the user's head (to the best of our abilities, anyway) to structure and design a site that meets that user's needs. Aside from your Uncle Marvin's personal home page, no site appeals to just one user. We construct multiple scenarios to forecast the needs of multiple users.

Accessible to a wide variety of web browsers and other devices

We've already pointed out that the Web is accessed by a wide range of browsers and that each of them has peculiarities, also referred to as incompatibilities. (Other words are also used, but we gave up swearing for Lent.)

Until all browsers support a core group of common standards, you will have to learn the ins and outs of each distressingly different browser and confirm what you think you know by testing your completed designs on as many browsers and platforms as possible. (We'll discuss testing in the next chapter.) In addition, your sites might need to work in nontraditional browsers and Internet devices such as Palm Pilots and web phones.

Can You Handle It?

By this point, the job of a web designer may appear too difficult. How is it possible to reconcile the needs of the user with the demands of the client and the heritage of the brand—not to mention coping with bandwidth limitations, browser incompatibilities, and the unknowable behavior of each individual visitor? Is it really possible to do this job well?

Obviously, we think so. Here are some not-so-obvious reasons why.

For one thing, web work is teamwork. Project managers, developers, web technicians, writers, producers, and other designers on your team will help you keep your eyes on the prize.

Moreover, as a design professional, you already possess most of the skills and talents needed to design great sites, including:

- The ability to research your client's products and end-users, creating work that promotes the former while speaking to the latter.
- A deep understanding of branding and identity.
- A comfortable familiarity with the processes of learning from and presenting to clients and colleagues. You know how to sell and when not to. You've learned how to listen.
- Maintaining schedules and deadlines. You deliver on time.
- A thorough knowledge of design principles.
- Expertise with digital design tools, such as Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator.

You can count on your teammates. You can count on yourself. And the process itself also will help you meet the goals you, your clients, and partners set for each project. Virtually every web agency employs methodologies and processes to guide you and your teammates from the initial meeting to the launch (and beyond). By a strange coincidence, you'll start learning about that very subject as soon as you turn the page.