

What you should know before designing a Web site

A Common Sense Guide to defining your site's audience, making it part of your other marketing activities, and issuing a call to action

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1 Document Copyright

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2 Introduction

2.1 About the author

Common Sense Design is a one-person design firm founded by British-born Nigel Gordijk in 2003, and based in New Hamburg, Ontario. With a B.A. (Hons) in Graphic Design, he is an independent Web design consultant who produces Web sites that are logical, easy to use and visually engaging.

Common Sense's client list includes:

- Honda
- Royal Shakespeare Company
- 10 Downing Street (UK Prime Minister's office)
- BT (British Telecom)
- Primus Telecommunications

As well as large corporates, Nigel has helped hundreds of small firms and start-ups for nearly two decades. This knowledge - as well as experience of running his own company - enables him to provide an attentive and personalised service to his clients.

Nigel is one of the co-founders of Creative Latitude, a world-wide network that promotes ethical business practices within creative industries. He devised its name and created its Web site.

He has written about Web design on Ecademy, Webreference, CreativePublic, and eGrindstone.

Nigel has published an eBook - Web Proposal Writing - and writes the Small Business Toolkit blog.

2.2 About this guide

More often than not, when clients come to me they have a clear idea that they need a Web site, but they aren't so clear about what they want it to achieve. Or, if they've defined their objectives, they don't know how to meet them. Sometimes, both of these criteria are vague.

Many people think the role of graphic designers, whether working in print or online, is simply to make their ideas or content look attractive and engaging. This is true in part: why would anyone bother to read their words of wisdom if they're presented in an ugly, amateurish fashion? Clients also tend to think that what I do is a type of alchemy, turning base content into shiny Web pages. Most are shocked, upon meeting me, to find that I speak fluent English, not "geek" or "creative".

Because I design and build Web sites, I'm not surprised to come across this expectation. After all, design and build are two of the key phases of any design project. But a third, crucial phase comes before all the alchemy. In fact, I would argue that it is the most important phase of all, because without it the design and build of a Web site is rendered empty and meaningless.

It's the "definition" phase.

Define before you design

The difference between good design and something that is merely decorative is that the former serves a purpose. This might be to impart information, make a sale, or entertain, for example. Whatever its purpose, this needs to be defined clearly in order for a design to be successful. In fact, it is impossible to measure a Web site design's success without a definition of its purpose. And the purpose of "What you should know before designing a Web site" is to help you create that elusive definition. It covers three key areas:

Identifying your audience

Placing your site in context

Issuing a call to action

What this guide won't provide is the secret of good Web design. I studied for four years at art college for my BA (Hons) in graphic design and I have over fifteen years' industry experience as a designer. Believe me, if I knew the secret my life would have been much easier.

Nigel Gordijk

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3 Identify your audience

3.1 User profiling

Many companies seem to think that their customers are clones of themselves. That's why their Web sites are designed to appeal to *them*, not the people they do business with. Their site contains copy that *they* would want to read, structured in the same way as *them* (their company), using fonts, images and colours that *they* like.

Of course, a Web site has to represent an organisation; it is essentially its online manifestation. But in order to thrive, the site, like the company, must cater to the needs of its audience. In order for you to do this, you need to decide who is likely to be using your site, why they're visiting it, and what they're doing whilst they're there.

3.1.1 Defining your site's users

There are two ways you can do this:

Speak to your customers

Ask them who they are, what they want from your company and its Web site, does your existing site deliver, where are you failing, what improvements would they like to see, and so on. You'll also need to find out their level of technical competence (and confidence), as well as what else they use the Internet for (hobbies and interests, for example). Do they use the Web at work (where they may have high-speed Internet access), or at home (where many people still have dial-up connections)?

The best way to carry out this research is by commissioning a firm that specialises in user experience studies. The negative side is the time and budget you'll need to allow for this which, in some cases, may be prohibitive.

The *second* best way, but better than not doing it at all, is to conduct your own research.

Above all, the most accurate way to design a Web site that matches the needs and abilities of your target audience is to ask them. If you have a good relationship with your clients, this shouldn't be a problem.

Make an educated guess

When your organisation was founded, it's unlikely that you made a product or created a service without any inkling that there was a need for it. Perhaps this was as a result of making something that you needed yourself and felt it could be offered to a wider audience. Fine; write down your answers to the definition questions. Whilst this isn't an ideal solution, because it's difficult for you to be objective, it is miles better than jumping straight in and creating a Web site when you have no idea what your objectives are.

3.1.2 Designing for real people

In his book, "[The Inmates Are Running The Asylum](#)", American author Alan Cooper uses the term "personas" to describe his idea of software user profiles. His work forms the basis for many Web consultancies' process of defining the core audience for their sites' designs. Whilst there are differences in the processes of designing software and Web sites, they both share a need for understanding people's interaction with them.

Cooper advocates creating imaginary people (personas) who will be the target audience for the project. These are divided into *primary* and *secondary* personas: the majority, core audience (e.g. your customers), as well as the people who will form a significant minority of users (e.g. potential employees).

He goes as far as giving the personas "real" names and photographs so that it becomes easier to focus on catering to their needs and abilities. That way, you're not creating a Web site for people who want to know more about Brand X; you're designing one for Mary Nelson, a married mother of two who is impatient when she uses the Web, doesn't like using new technology, uses email, etc. Or MBA graduate, Tom Hammond, who is looking to join Company X but wants to find out how the firm is run, what its beliefs are, and the details of the services it provides.

That way, when you come up with the idea of adding what you consider to be an exciting function to the site, you'll be able to ask: "Does Mary want or need this feature?"; "Will she understand it?"; "Will it add value to the site in her opinion?". If you answer "no" to these questions or similar ones, then it may be best to reconsider its inclusion. It eradicates the temptation to ask, vaguely, if people want this site tool. Which "people" exactly are you creating your site for?

Personas force you to focus on every detail and aspect of your Web site, thereby taking some of the guesswork out of the user definition process.

4 Placing your site in context

It's extremely rare that a company commissions a Web site as its one and only marketing initiative. Rather, it's more likely that online marketing will form part of an overall plan that encompasses offline activities such as advertising and brochures.

4.1 Look for the hook

I've often been asked to design a site some time after the client's offline marketing collateral has already been produced. Many of them don't regard their site as having a relationship with these activities, but I always advise that they step back and look at this as part of a cohesive strategy. People may interact with printed materials and Web sites in different ways, but this doesn't mean that a company's customers will only see one element of its marketing. This being the case, even though I may not have been involved in the creation of the print work I ask for samples of them so that I can find some visual "hooks" that I can use to link the different media together.

4.2 Mirror, mirror on the Web...

As an example, below left is the cover of a brochure for Child Safe Zones, a company that provides ways for parents to locate their children if they go missing. To the right is my design for the client's homepage, part of the Web site that they commissioned me to create. The brochure was produced by another design consultancy, but you can see where I've mirrored the colours, typography and use of images in my Web design. This creates a coherent image for the client.

You can register today with Child Safe Zones...

A great use of your child's portrait!




A simple, effective scheme which helps you to help your child if they become lost, anywhere in the UK or abroad.

Tempest Photography is supporting Child Safe Zones, so you may use one of your small photographs to register.

Register online at: www.childsafezones.co.uk
or use the form provided on the back page of this leaflet

Safe and found



How it works
Download a registration form
Register online
Keep online

Be safe
Never your family apart
24 hours in operation
anywhere

Be seen
A 24 hour, 24 days a week
24/7 helpline
anywhere

Child Safe Everywhere

The simple, effective way to find your lost child in the UK or abroad




Wherever you are in the world, the people who look after you and your family, the people who you go to, wherever your children travel - days out, holidays, school trips - your family ID goes with them.

- Smartphones and tags speak for a child when you can't
- A photograph helps others search through your eyes
- 24-hour helpline, whether on a skiing trip in Canada or a day out at the local beach

Look out for the distinctive white stickers and posters in designated **Safe Zones**. These provide additional help through a helpline to local security.

Registering is easy
It takes a few minutes to set up your account and it can be updated online. It's password protected and secure. Address details never appear against your photo.

The cost for a family is **£10 per year**, however there is also an **Emergency pack** if information you provide registered members will require a **compulsory pack** of top up information.

Benefits of registration:

- Newsletters and safety advice
- Download entry into various family directories
- A family ID number that works everywhere
- Access to other lost and found offers

[Register now >](#)

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"A photograph is one of the most valuable tools to help if a child goes missing. The scheme provides parents and the authorities the ability to access and circulate vital information when it is needed most."

See Leah
Child Safe Zones, her mother and a few other people
Cristina

MISSING



Child Safe Marks
"We've used Child Safe James I know that if Charles goes missing, I can get a poster put up that has the family account in it." **Julian** *James is now safe.*

In other cases, where another designer has created the company's logo, I'll try to use some element of from it that will create a similar visual link. Again, this might manifest itself in the use of colour, typography (fonts) and shapes from the branding. On my Ladbrokes Casino site design, I used the parent company's logo shape as my hook. It appears as a recurring branding theme, and this creates the visual link.



5 Call to action

Visiting and using a Web site is an active pursuit. People choose to type your Web address into their browser, or to click on a link that points to it. If so, then they are mentally engaged and ready to hear your message.

5.1 Passive or active medium?

When someone watches television or reads a magazine, the advertising messages they encounter is almost incidental to the content that surrounds them. They can choose to skip the ads by switching channels or turning the page. In many cases, these may be regarded as passive media. The Web, on the other hand, is an active medium.

When people visit your site, they have made a conscious decision to do so, and they are ready to hear what you have to say. They are ready to buy from you or to be persuaded by your message.

5.2 Are you sliced bread?

But when you've said your piece, then what? What exactly do you want potential clients to do once they're convinced that you're the best thing since sliced bread (assuming you think homogenised sliced bread is a good thing)? Surprisingly few companies clearly define the desired effect they want their slick, expensive Web site to have on the people who choose to visit it.

Sometimes, the purpose of a site is only to provide content to be read, such as online magazines or sports fan sites, for example. In these cases, the site's owner wants to share information, their knowledge or enthusiasm, and there may not be a call to action.

But this is obviously not the case with company Web sites, which should be explicit about their role in a commercial business venture. Exceptions to this are "brand building" sites, such as Nike's, which try to make you loyal to their products.

5.3 Shout clearly

Successful sites have a clear, unambiguous call to action that leave no doubt about what people should do next. If it is essentially an online brochure, then perhaps the next step is for the visitor to contact you for more information, so say so explicitly on a button or link.

E-commerce sites contain several steps that make up the call to action, which is to make a purchase. These steps include "Search", "Add to basket" or "Checkout". Not to do so would be like opening a shop and hiding the tills. Go into a high street department store and you're likely to see big "Please pay here" signs hanging from the ceiling.

If your site is for a commercial enterprise, you should tell people what action they should take next and make it easy for them to do so. Otherwise, it will be a futile exercise that invites people to interact with you, only to miss an opportunity to turn them into paying customers.

Take this animated banner ad I created for Child Safe Zones. It defines a problem (“If a child goes missing...”), suggests a way to get peace of mind (“...help is at hand”), then tells viewers what to do next (“Register your family now”), followed by the client’s name. An explicit message, clearly stated.



If a child
goes missing...



...help is
at hand.



Register your
family now.



Child
Safe
ZONES



6 Contact Details

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