

SMART SOLUTIONS FOR BETTER WEB SITES



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A Web site has the potential to make or break a company. In Web site construction in the Twin Cities — and perhaps design communities worldwide — there is healthy tension between marketing and agency creatives with their technology brethren.

With the aim to create smarter, attractive Web sites with an eye on branding, here are some observations from this dual perspective:

■ **Branding is king.** Branding is what makes Minneapolis-based retailer Target Corp. a compelling “carrot” for Twin Cities’ designers. Everyone knows the red bulls’ eye and related emotion of a quality, community-based shopping experience. When branding permeates your company, it yields strong emotions (of loyalty) and consistently great experiences — the kind that make you feel good about your company interactions — then higher-yielding revenue naturally flows.



■ **Marketing professionals and graphic designers design Web sites.**

It’s greatly appreciated to have sketches and ideas to work with, but leave the final Web site design work to the development team. Or, at least work closely with the development team along the way. A good development team provides: new ideas to bring wow to your creative concepts; sensitivity to long-term goals for the Web site (editing needs, future additions); search positioning strategies throughout the site from the start; and overall usability, including Section 508 compliance, as needed. Some large organizations and all Minnesota state agencies require Web sites which are compliant with the federal government’s Section 508 standards for Electronic and Information Technology under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Minnesota non-visual access law.

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■ **Build in flexibility.** Increasingly Web-savvy clients want flexibility for easier updating and editing of their Web site. Build it in from the start. The firms working together to this end need to communicate early in the project — to understand overall client business goals, and then team toward appropriate online delivery of brand and function.

■ **Do you speak hyper-text-markup language?** You don’t need to speak HTML, but you do need to understand that developers will want to know early in the conceiving process the programming language that will be used. Remember, it’s a big deal to your development partner whether your Web site is HTML-based or Flash-based; if it needs a Content Management System for some or all parts of the Web site; and whether the design will be changed often (if the latter is the case, develop with “quick-swap” photo areas and/or Cascading Style Sheets).

■ **Freshening your look can be profitable.** Concurrent with the 10-year history of the World Wide Web, I have seen many companies fall into a “re-design made every two years.” This cycle comes from a) the reality that Web technologies change enough in a year or two that sites often start to look outdated; and b) the client usually outgrows its Web site content. A client’s stance on marketing and expected communications with their customers determines the strategies that will ultimately maximize the client’s online spending.

To address the first issue of a site design simply looking outdated, developers are using “skins” more than before. A skin is a design that exists around your content and can be replaced or changed without rebuilding all site content. Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) and various Content Management Systems (CMS) can change the design of the Web site while keeping all navigation and content “as is.” While initial set-up costs may be marginally higher than those Web sites designed without these solutions, subsequent development time is comparably much lower than a total re-design. Simple changes to the HTML or Flash files can also give a powerful face lift to many Web sites, without doing a thing with CSS.

Local marketing and creative firms should be aware that sites and an online presence are essential to the viability of most businesses. Marketing spending is swinging in favor of online solutions: Web statistics and marketing magazines tell us that online advertising is up significantly and TV advertising is down. In today’s Web-conscious, tech-driven world, marketing budgets need to be weighted heavily in favor of online design, development and advertising strategies. Where is your Web? ■

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