

EASE™ Web Navigation & Design *by Christine Mulgrave, BES Consulting Services*

At the heart of web design is understanding the purpose of a website. Simply stated...websites serve to inform and/or sell. The public's attention span is very short when it comes to viewing websites. In fact, the average person does not read a web page, they scan them. Within 30 seconds of entering your site a visitor needs to have a basic understanding of who you are and what you do. Many website designers (both novice and professional) get lost trying out the latest program features or technical skills that they have acquired and forget that the general public does not care about the long hours that it took to get a certain effect just right.

Don't get me wrong. I am a fan of interesting, eye-catching web designs, but one must always remember the purpose of a website is to inform and/or sell. To begin one must answer three basic questions:

1. What is the purpose of your website? Is it to inform or sell or both?
2. What do you want people to know about your company?
3. Who is your target audience and what do you want them to do while or after visiting your site?


Your answers to these basic questions will help guide the philosophical development of your website. Yes, I said "philosophical development." Each site has a philosophy or guiding premise, whether the designer acknowledges it or not. A site's philosophy is conveyed via color scheme, text style, images used, animation used or not, but most of all the navigation or flow with which a visitor can move throughout a site. The greater the ease of navigation, the greater your website's ability to inform and/or sell and attract return visitors.

EASE™ Web Navigation & Design has a simple, yet sophisticated philosophy – websites should be simple to use and access, yet have a level of sophistication that sets it apart from its competitors. That sophistication can come in the way of inspiring images, inventive, but functional colors and/or classic design elements often borrowed from the print medium. Website navigation should be **easy** to follow, **accessible** on all pages within the site, **simple** to use and understand and **effective** in presenting each section of the website clearly. **Easy, Accessible, Simple, Effective** that's **EASE™ Web Navigation & Design**.

EASY meaning that a website's navigation should be easy to follow and have consistency. This is often called *global navigation* in the trade. Things to avoid are: 1) changing navigation placement from page to page; 2) differing sets of colors from page to page. Redundancy is a good thing in web design.

ACCESSIBLE means that a visitor should be able to find your navigation bar regardless of the browser or screen resolution that they are using. Don't hide your navigation on the right-hand side of your site. We are a left to right reading society. Keep it left and vertical or top-left and horizontal.

SIMPLE refers to the structure of your navigation. Sounds, flashy buttons and rollovers can be very eye-catching, but ask yourself this simple question – After looking at this twenty times, is it going to get on your nerves? Simple is predictable and fits within the overall feel of your website. People like predictability...it makes us comfortable.

EFFECTIVE navigation speaks to the terms used to highlight sections of your website. Some norms are About Us, Contact Us, Links, Shop, etc. Some tips are: 1) keep the navigation titles to two words or less; 2) use as few characters as possible or familiar language; and 3) if using images in place of lettered titles...please, please, please make them relevant. For example, an 'Email' button could be reflected graphically as . But challenges arise when you want to reflect About Us and the like graphically. I suggest that you do not force it, just use letters. Remember your goal is to inform and/or sell and people do not want to have to think about how to navigate your website.

If this article has peaked your interest in web design usability and creating a more user-friendly website, then visit www.usability.gov and check-out books by Design Guru, Jakob Nielsen for more information.

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