Chapter Eight. Site Maps

sīt' măp (n.)

A visual representation of a web site's structure. Also known as a structural model, taxonomy, hierarchy, navigation model, or site structure.

Designers and information architects use site maps to represent the structure of information on a web site. Site maps generally illustrate part-whole relationships, where an item lower on the map belongs to an item higher on the map. It's a hierarchy. And while site maps generally show how a user will experience the informationin other words, the hierarchy matches the steps a user will take to get through the sitethis is becoming less and less of a concern. The dynamic nature of sites and the prevalence of search functions embedded into sites make the user's path to the lower levels of the site much less obvious.

By the way, just to be clear, the site maps we're talking about here are not the kinds of site maps you'll find on the web site itself. Some sites include a "site map" which is meant to act as an index of everything on the site. Though some implementations of the online site map may look like the deliverable discussed in this chapter, it is a very different animal.

Site Maps at a Glance

Site maps have become commonplace, and even those who have never before seen one in the flesh recognize their purpose. This is perhaps less a function of site maps having a common visual language (though many of them do look alike) and more about how people experience the web.

The first of the examples (Figure 8.1) shows a typical site map, rendered in "org-chart format," so called because it looks like one of those charts describing an office hierarchy. The second (Figure 8.2) is a site map for a manufacturing company, showing many more layers of information, including which pages appear in the site's global navigation and which template is used to render each page. Though the second site map contains much more information, it still shows the hierarchy explicit in the first.

Figure 8.1. The most basic site map looks a bit like an org-chart, a system of boxes representing pages, connected by lines representing links. The placement and connections imply a hierarchy between the pages, such that the site's home page is at the top and the categories and content descend from there.

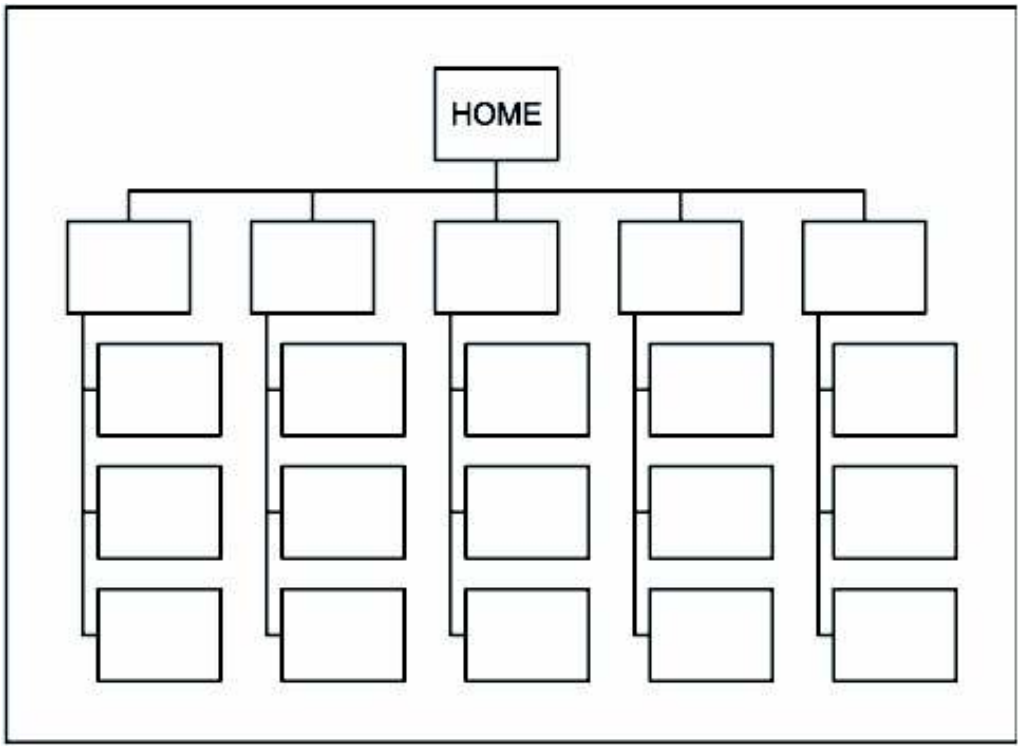

Figure 8.2. Even without the boxes and the rigid grid structure, this site map still implies a purposeful hierarchy. This site map was created for a manufacturer's web site and shows lots of information embedded in the representations of the pages, including page templates, project

management information, and page groupings.

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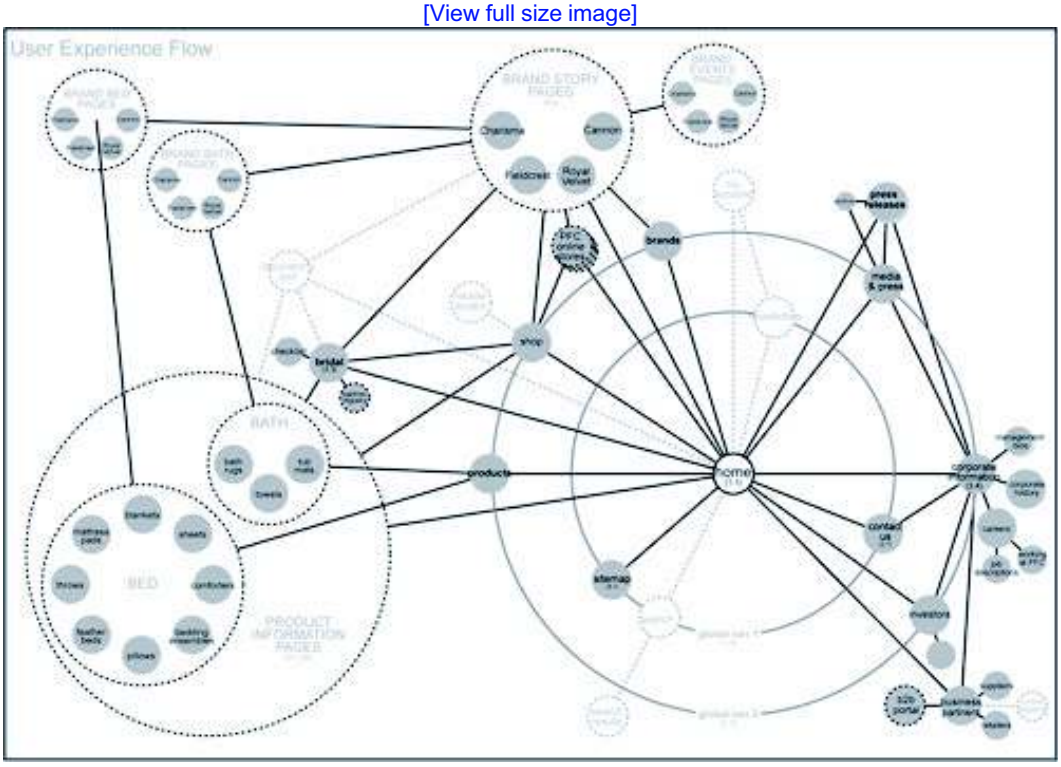


Site Maps Overview

PurposeWhat are site maps for?

A web site, in its simplest form, is a collection of information. A site map shows how all that information fits together. It provides the project team with one view of how the site will be constructed. Navigation, which may be a major component of site maps, can be fraught with political and design controversy, and site maps allow project teams to work through these issues.

AudienceWho uses them?

Designers and developers will be interested in how the site fits together and how the site map handles content that can live in multiple categories. Depending on your site design and maintenance methodology, a site map can play a crucial role in determining project schedules. During the design process, site maps help design teams hammer out navigation issues.

ScaleHow much work are they?

As with most documentation, the amount of work it takes to make a site map depends on how much you've thought through the underlying ideas. If you've planned the site structure from soup to nuts, pulling it all together into the form of a site map shouldn't take more than a couple days. On the other hand, there's something about the process of turning ideas into formal documents that reveals holes in the ideas. A site structure is never final after a first draft. You may need several revisions to make sure user priorities are adequately represented and every piece of content is sufficiently categorized.

ContextWhere do they fall in the process?

While occasionally used as a diagnostic tool to help designers get their arms around the scope of the existing site, site maps are used more often to define a new structure for the web site. If your methodology has a specific design phase, the site map will appear toward the beginning of this step in the process. A site structure cannot be created in a vacuum, and it depends on a complete understanding of the content on the site, the business goals, and what the users need.

FormatWhat do they look like?

Generally speaking, a site map is a paper document consisting of boxes representing different areas of the site, connected by lines. The lines show the semantic relationships between the areas of the site and may also represent navigation, but don't have to.

Challenges

Of all the documents in this book, the site map ranks at least in the top three for stability. Most designers and information architects are not only familiar with site maps, but have used them extensively. The challenges with site maps lie not in creating or using them, but instead in their ability to scale to accommodate larger and more dynamic sites. This challenge boils down to answering the question, "Should I be doing a site map at all?"

For sites that consist of information that people will consume in some way, a site map is indispensable because it allows the design team to create a model for the structures that hold that information. It facilitates the rest of the design process because it allows the project team to deal with broad categories consisting of multiple pieces of content rather than every individual piece of content.

For web sites that do not rest on highly structured relationships between content, the site map may be of questionable value. Instead of specific content, however, a site map can show how functions relate to each other. A web site that allows people to share media with each other may exclude specific navigation categories, and instead have a series of functions that allow people to manage their media collections. The site map could show how the site stitches all these different functions together.

These two cases illustrate another important distinction facing designers building site maps. In some instances, the site map accurately reflects the user experience of the siteeach rectangle on the site map represents a page on the site and each line between the rectangles represents a physical link. Other site maps may simply represent relationships between content without explicitly suggesting navigation.

This latter case is important because it also covers situations where each piece of content has multiple locations, where the user can reach a single piece of content through any one of many different pathways. The site map may suit content in a particular set of relationships, but the dynamic nature of the web means that these relationships are not exclusive. It can be important to establish a set of primary categories for the content on the site, but the major risk is that other team members will think that the navigation is static.

Creating Site Maps

Depending on how you want to use your site map, you may decide not to invest a lot of time in its preparationthere may be no need to include so much information. At its most stripped down, a site map is a collection of web pages with their connections highlighted. The additional layers of a site map can help create a more specific understanding of these pages and the links between them. Layer 2 includes information on different types of pages and links, while layer 3 includes further contextthe basis for structuring the site as shown in the map.

Layer 1: Boxes, Arrows, and Little Else

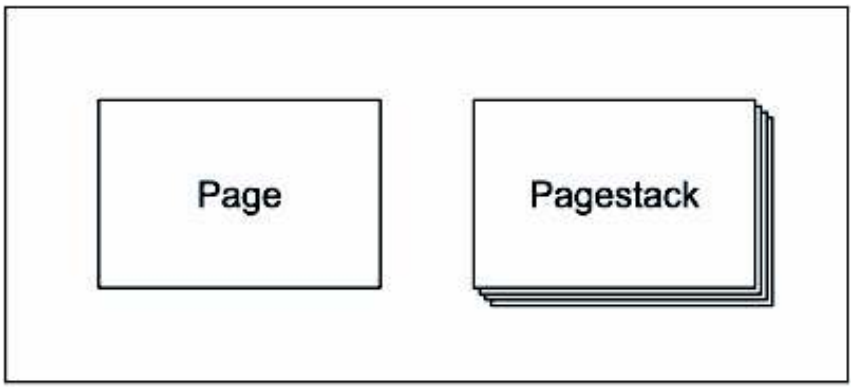
At its essence, a site map is a collection of shapes representing different areas of the site connected by lines. As discussed above, the lines can be structural, showing how users navigate through the information hierarchy, or semantic, showing how different pieces of content relate to each other without implying navigation.

Pages and More

The basic unit of currency in a site map is the page. Pages are typically represented by a square or rectangle, and sometimes by a circle, and they are always labeled with the name of the page.

Your site map may focus on a higher level of the site, describing relationships between groups of pages, such that a node on the map represents a set of pages that share some function or purpose. Of course, your site map can include both individual pages and groups of pages, in which case it should clearly distinguish between them.

Figure 8.3. Jesse James Garrett created a set of shapes for use in site maps and flowcharts called the Visual Vocabulary. In his stencil, web pages are represented by rectangles and pages that have dynamic content are represented by stacks of rectangles. Courtesy of Jesse James Garrett. For more information visit http://www.jjg.net/ia/visvocab .



Your site map may include things other than HTML pages, specifically downloads of other file types. If you're keeping your site map basic, you can differentiate these kinds of downloads from regular

pages by including the file type in the labelfor example, "Company Overview (PDF)." If you decide to make your site map more elaborate, as described in layer 2 , you can differentiate between these different formats visually.

Finally, a node may represent an entire area of the site. More than just a group of pages, a node on your site map can represent an entire section consisting of many, many pages. This works well when you just want to present a general structure for the entire site at a very high level. A site map using areas, rather than groups or individual pages, can act as an introduction to a much more complex site map or set of maps.

Frankly, the distinction between a group and an area is somewhat arbitrarythere's no specific numberbut, generally speaking, a group of pages can be represented by a singular purpose, like "book a flight," whereas a site area is more general, like "customer service."

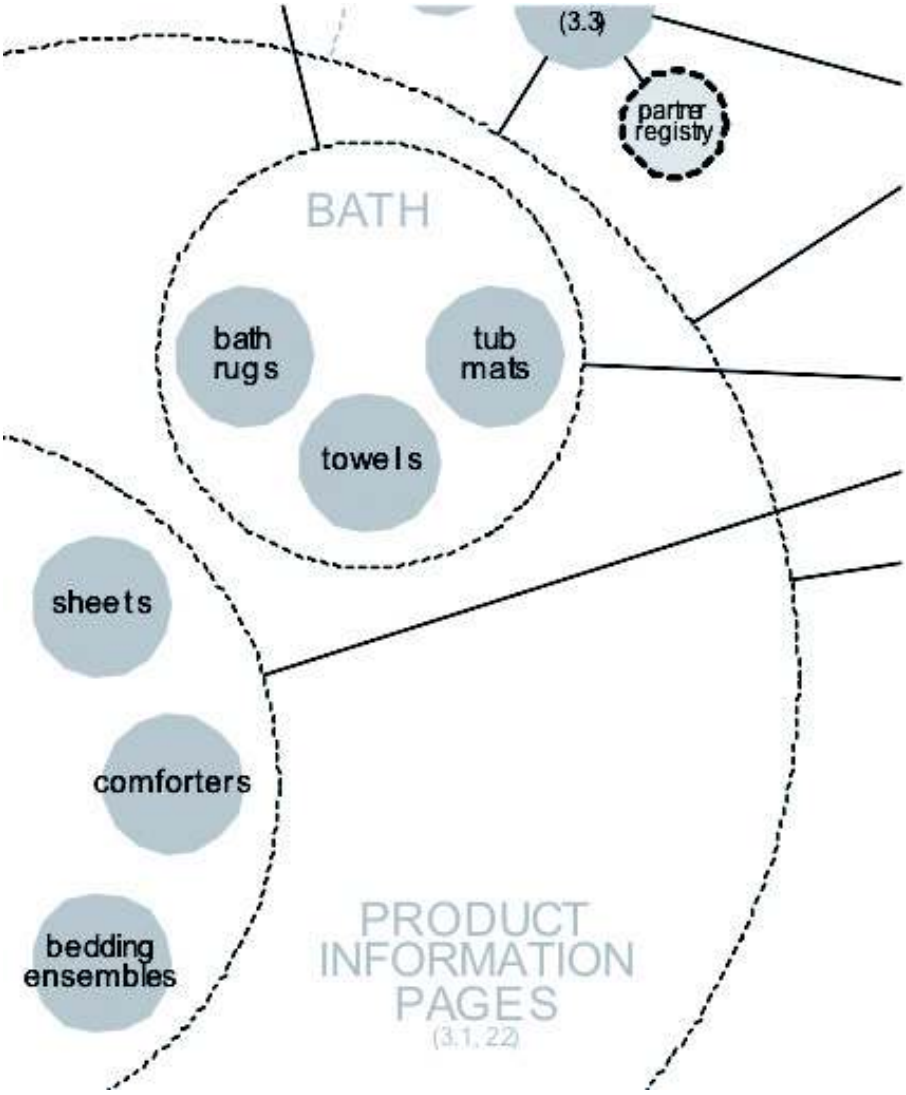
Links

There's not a lot to say about the links between pages and other areas of the site. They are usually represented by a line between nodes, although you may find situations where a line is unnecessary and adds visual noise. In the excerpt pictured here, these pages all belong to the same group, and the links between them are implied by the visual grouping.

This excerpt also demonstrates that the links don't have to occur between specific pages. In this case, the site map shows a link to the group of pages, indicating that every page in the group is linked, without showing multiple lines.

There is one other consideration for the links on a site map: The physical links can easily outnumber the semantic links. In other words, there may be many hyperlinks on the site between a variety of pages that are not represented explicitly on the site map because there are just too many of them. Instead, the site map focuses on the hierarchical relationships. If you want to show both hierarchical relationships and physical links, be sure to visually distinguish between the two.

Figure 8.4. Because this site map has so many connections between different areas of the site, the links between individual pages in a group are not represented explicitly.



Hierarchy

The nodes and links on your site map combine to form a hierarchy, a set of relationships implying that some things belong to other things. A hierarchy is comfortable for people because part-whole relationships are easy to understand, even if reality suggests that the actual relationships are more complex. Your site map should be as clear as possible about the hierarchy in your web site's structure.

The most obvious way to imply hierarchy is through the layout of the site map. Higher-level pages usually appear at the top or the left side of the page, especially if you use the "org-chart" approach. Using the connected bubbles approach, higher-level pages might appear in the middle of the page.

You can use other visual cues to indicate hierarchy, but be careful not to be redundant. The size of the node or formatting, like the use of heavier line weights, can show that some nodes are higher in the hierarchy, but with a good layout, this formatting may be unnecessary. In fact, you might reserve special formatting for showing other kinds of information about the node, as described in the next layer.

Layer 2: Elaborating on Pages and Links

Rectangles connected by lines can say a lot about the structure of a site, but your situation may call for more detail. Layer 2 builds on the basic structure created by the boxes and lines to elaborate on

each.

Page Types and Priorities

There are many details you can describe for each page on the site map, though you may find it difficult to pack them all into one small rectangle. Before trying to come up with a visual convention for any of these properties of a page, you should consider whether it's immediately relevant to your need.

Static vs. Dynamic Pages: Even though most web pages these days are generated by a database, there are still many static pagesstand-alone HTML files that do not rely on programming or scripting to show information. If your web site is like most, it will contain a mix of static and dynamic pages, and it may be worthwhile to visually distinguish them. A site map that highlights these differences can tell people at a glance how many pages require more than the attention of an HTML jockey. On the other hand, your site may be built on a system of entirely dynamic pages, which changes the focus of your site map anyway, as shown in Figure 8.5 .

Figure 8.5. This site map describes a web site that has mostly dynamic pages, in which content is pulled from a database. The page names, therefore, represent functions rather than content, and the dynamic pages are portrayed as stacks of pages.

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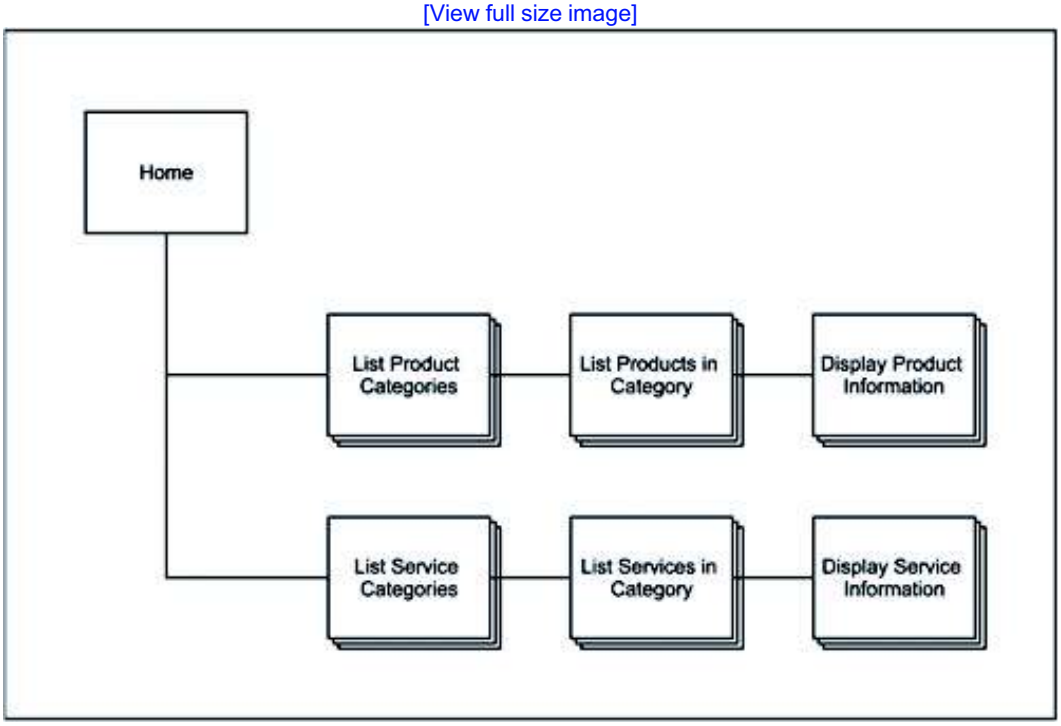


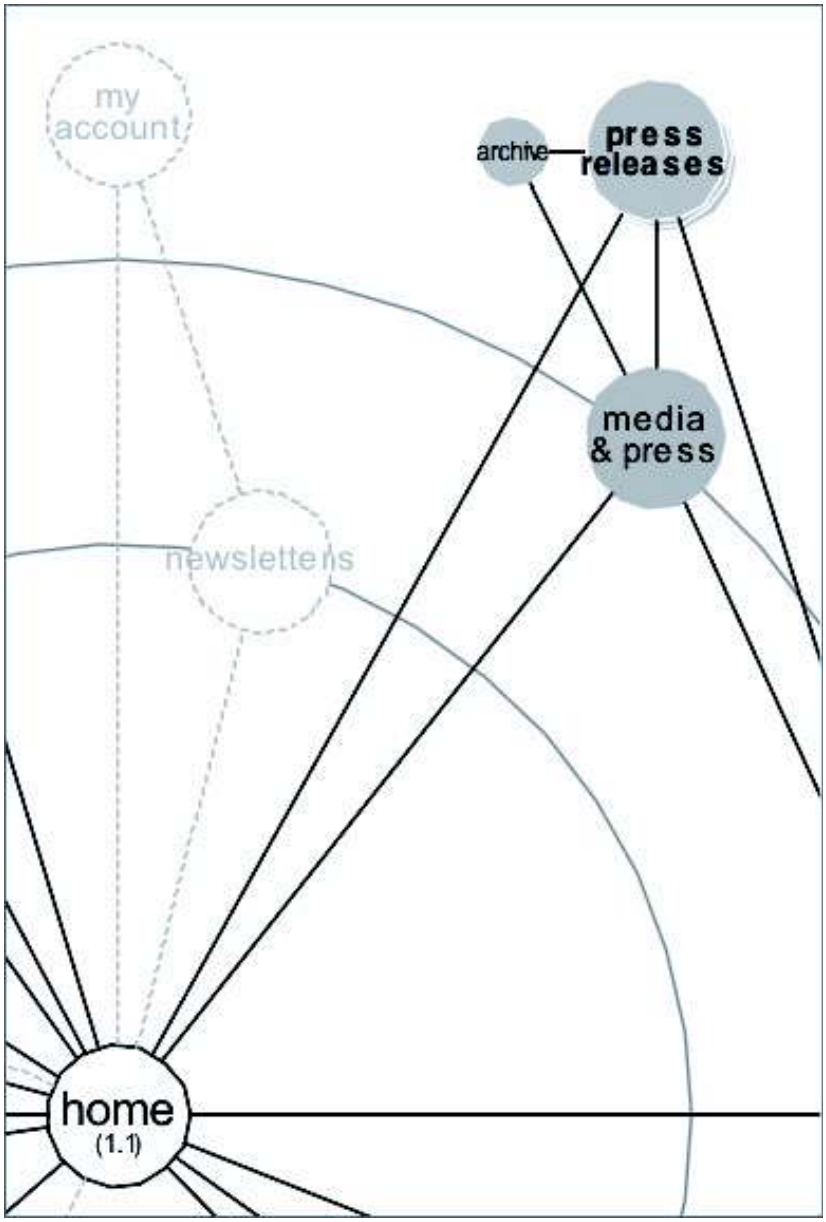
Content vs. Interactive Pages: While the static/dynamic distinction indicates the differences between what goes on behind the scenes for each particular page, pages also vary in what the user sees. The basic distinction is between pages that contain information to be consumed and pages that contain forms for the user to submit information. This distinction may be important for maintenance planning, or for keeping an eye on the different ways users can interact with your site.

HTML vs. Downloads: As described in layer 1 , your web site may include non-HTML content, like a PDF or Microsoft Word document. You can use visual formatting to distinguish HTML from other types of files, or be even more specific and distinguish between file types. Some site maps use conventional

logosthe icons for the files that appear on your desktopto represent these files in the site map.

Project Management: Your site map can also include information specific to the project itself, like when pages will be deployed or whether a page contains new content, repurposed content, or old content. Another useful distinction for project managers and team members is whether some pages are out of scope for the current project.

Figure 8.6. The site map for the manufacturing site reflects two broad phases of developmentwhat will be built now, represented by the solid circles and lines, and what will be built later, represented by dotted lines.



Page Ownership: In addition to the technical properties of the page, you might also show organizational properties, like which group or person owns each page. By coloring each node on the site map differently, according to the group that owns the content, for example, you can create a startling picture showing the number of groups responsible for maintaining the site.

Editorial Properties: Finally, a site map can show information about the content of the page, like how often the page needs updating. A related property is the template used for the page. The site

map in Figure 8.2 has three main templates, not including the home page and off-site pages, and uses color to distinguish between them.

Groups of Pages

Plain site maps make no attempt to show relationships between pages or nodes other than the links between them. But relationships between pages are much more complex, and while they may not be immediately relevant to the user, they can help the organization make sense of how the site works.

Functional groups are collections of pages that relate to a particular purpose or task, like logging in or booking a flight. Contextual groups are collections of pages that relate because of some external context, like being intended for a particular set of users.

There are any number of ways to group pages visually, but the key concern from a design perspective is to avoid confusing groupings with links. The visual conventions you use to group pages, therefore, should be subordinate to the links between them.

Link Details

Since a link can represent a semantic relationshipone page "belongs" to another pageor a physical relationshipone page may be accessed from another pageyou may need to distinguish between them visually. Links, of course, can represent so many different things, and you could devise a unique visual convention for each of them. For example, the movement between a search page and the results page is conceptually different from the movement between a category page and a page for an item in that category. The question becomes whether there's value in representing all these distinctions, and that's up to you and the project. Most site maps do well to focus on differences between pages, and not on the links between them.

In Figure 8.2 , the site map does not vary the formatting of the lines between pages, but through subtle differences in how the lines connect to the pages indicates the variety of links on the site.

Layer 3: Providing Further Context

The information in the last layer takes readers outside the user experience and provides context for the site's structural information. With regard to user experience, there are two types of context: user needs and business strategy. To put a page in context, the site map can show how important that page is to users or to the business, or how it relates to a particular aspect of the business strategy or user profile.

Figure 8.7. This site map varies the size of the nodes to show their relative importance. The larger the circle, the more directly it supports the overall needs of the user or business.

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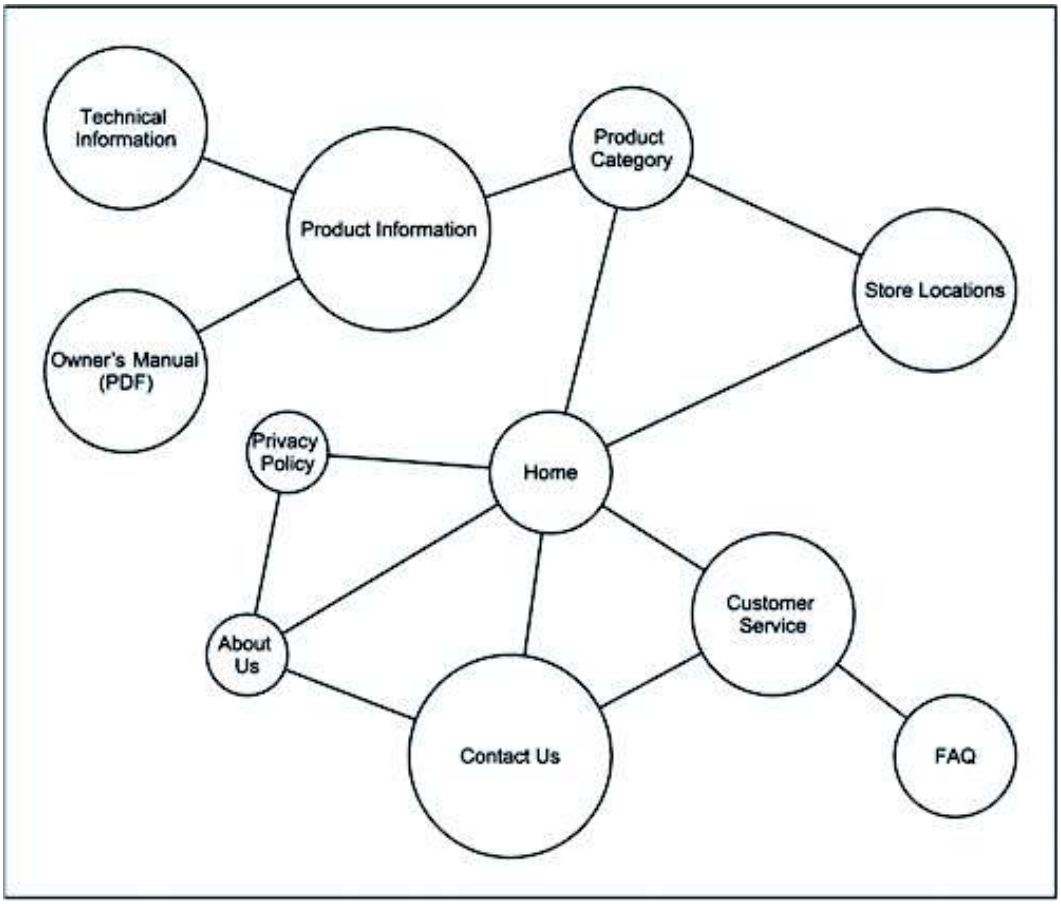
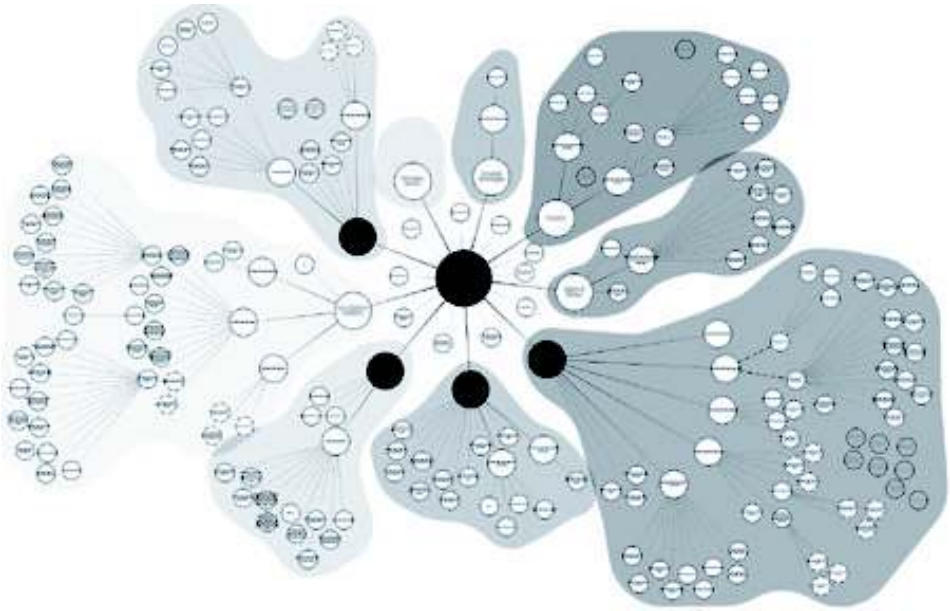


Figure 8.8. Color-coding can show which aspect of a user profile or a business strategy a page supports. If there are five different elements to the business strategy, for example, the site map can show how different pages support those elements. Courtesy of James Melzer. For more information, visit http://www.jamesmelzer.com .



User Needs

Incorporating what users need into the site map can provide a rationale for the site's structure. Some site maps show the relative importance of different pages based on how well they address the needs of the user. If your site supports a variety of users, it may be difficult to show that some pages are more important to some groups of users.

Business Strategy

Like user needs, business strategy can show the rationale for certain structural decisions. It provides further context by showing how the site map supports all aspects of the business and demonstrates continuity in the processthe work you did establishing or capturing the business strategy feeds directly into the design work.

If you're making a site map of an existing site, these devices can show where the organization falls short, supporting one aspect of the user needs or business strategy in abundance and others not enough.

Scanning the Skeleton: Basic Mapping

The simplicity of site maps makes it tempting to dive right in without careful planning. Like any documentation, however, a little planning goes a long way. Who will use the site map and how they'll use it can make a huge difference in its final format.

Purpose and Timing

The site map is probably the first step you'll take in the design process. If you've done, say, a content inventory and lots of user research, the site map is the logical next piece of the story, showing how the content on the site will be organized to meet user needs.

You might also use the site map as a diagnostic tool, and build it to show the current structure of the site. This can help point out inconsistencies or simply nonsensical navigation pathways. Line this kind of site map up with user research and you have a very compelling argument to change the structure of the site.

Audience

The message behind a site map is relatively simple, which means there isn't much nuance based on who you're building it for. Designers, developers, and project stakeholders all expect the same thing: a document that establishes site structure, site navigation, and page priorities.

Some elements included in your site map may be more relevant to the project team than to the clientfor instance, the templates for the contentbut this isn't a reason to leave the information out. Generally, this information can be layered into the site map unobtrusively, without obscuring the parts of the site map that are important to the client.

The document's audience may affect the overall format of your site map. If the people who need to use the site map have never used one before, or are used to a certain approach, you may not want to deviate too much from their comfort zone.

Content Development

Before committing the site map to paper, you may find it useful to create a list of all the pages you want to capture in the document. This approach allows you to think through each data point you might want to capture for each area of the sitehow important it is, what type of page it is, or any of the other distinctions mentioned in layers 2 and 3 . If you've done a content inventory (described in Chapter 7) you've already done most of the legwork for this exercise, although you might be mapping new structures where the inventory shows existing structures.

Figure 8.9. In planning a site map, this information architect made a list of all the elements he wanted to show and identified how they will be represented in the site map. The use of graph paper by an information architect is inevitable.

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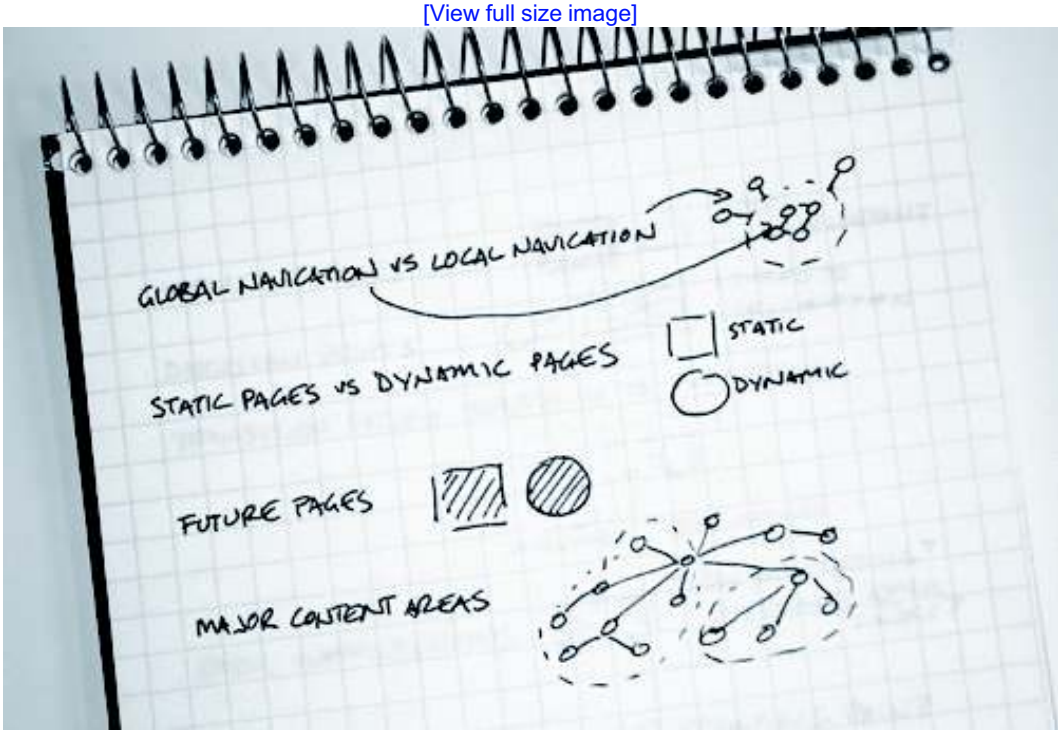

Improving Your Mapping Skills

There's nothing wrong with the basic org-chart format for a site map. If you're new to this process, that may be the easiest approach. After having done a few site maps, however, you might begin to see some inadequacies with this format. These tips can help you move beyond the rigid presentation of site maps as boxes and lines.

Play With Layout

Typical site maps look like organization chartssimilarly-sized rectangles connected with right-angle connectors. These maps are easy to understand because they follow a prototype of sorts. On the other hand, they don't show a lot of detail, and this format can take up a lot of space on the page. There are many different ways to show relationships between two shapes, and experimenting with different techniques might help you create a more refined document that allows you to show more.

The risk here is that you'll build something too difficult for your stakeholders to understand. The org-chart approach, while somewhat inelegant, is perfectly clear and very familiar. The flip side is that

you may find yourself boxed innearly literallyand unable to effectively capture all the necessary information. In these situations you must judge whether you can hold your client's hand to help them understand your approach to site maps. The site maps shown in Figures 8.1 and 8.2 illustrate the difference between the traditional "org-chart" approach and something a little more far out.

It's also important to consider the placement on the page. Convention says that people start in the upper-left corner of the page and read down and to the right. But visual depictions operate differently, and the center of the page may be an appropriate starting point. Putting the main page in the middle, for example, gives you much more room to work with for laying out the site map.

Use a Consistent Visual Language

If you find that you need to show a lot of different kinds of informationimportance to the user, where content is hosted, template types, etc.you can adopt a visual language that makes these distinctions so you don't have to specify them explicitly. The most effective way to develop a visual language for your site maps is to make a list of everything you need to describe for each content area represented in the map. After prioritizing this list, you can identify how to represent each kind of information.

Figure 8.10. This is the same site map as in Figure 8.7 , but uses shading instead of size to show relative importance. Each approach has implications for the overall look of the site map, and can compete with other information you're trying to convey. Consider all approaches carefully before settling on one convention or another.

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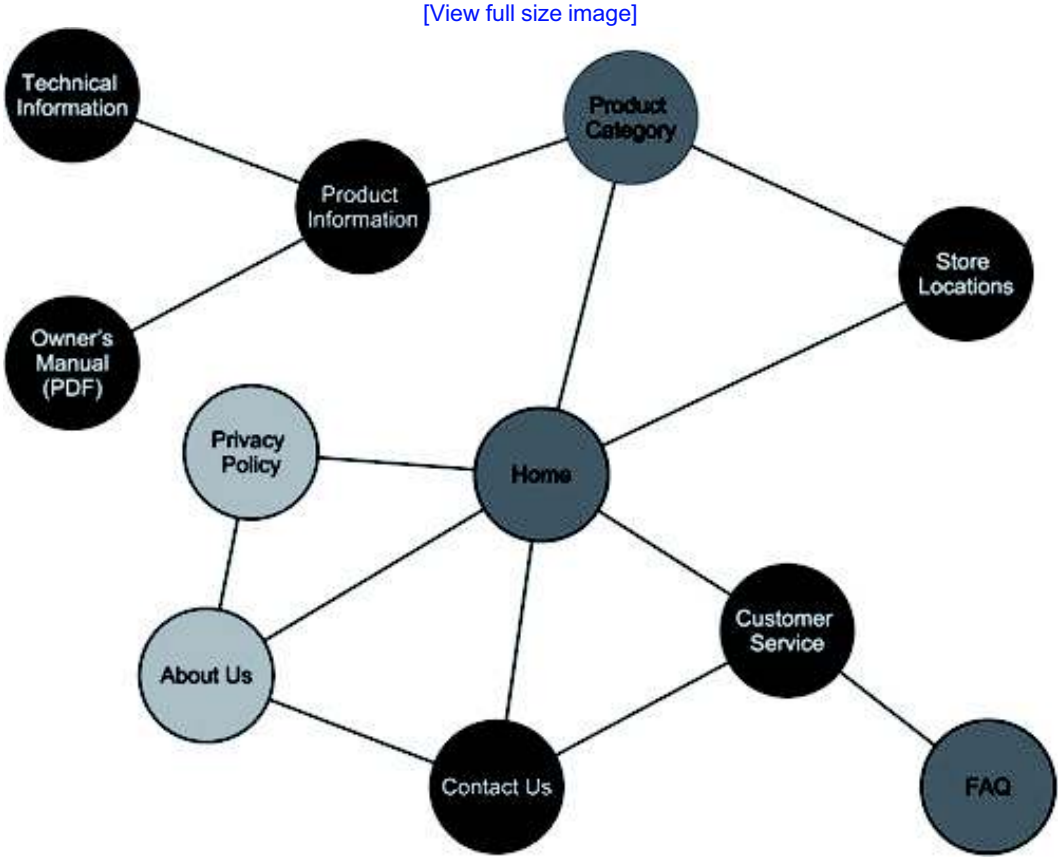
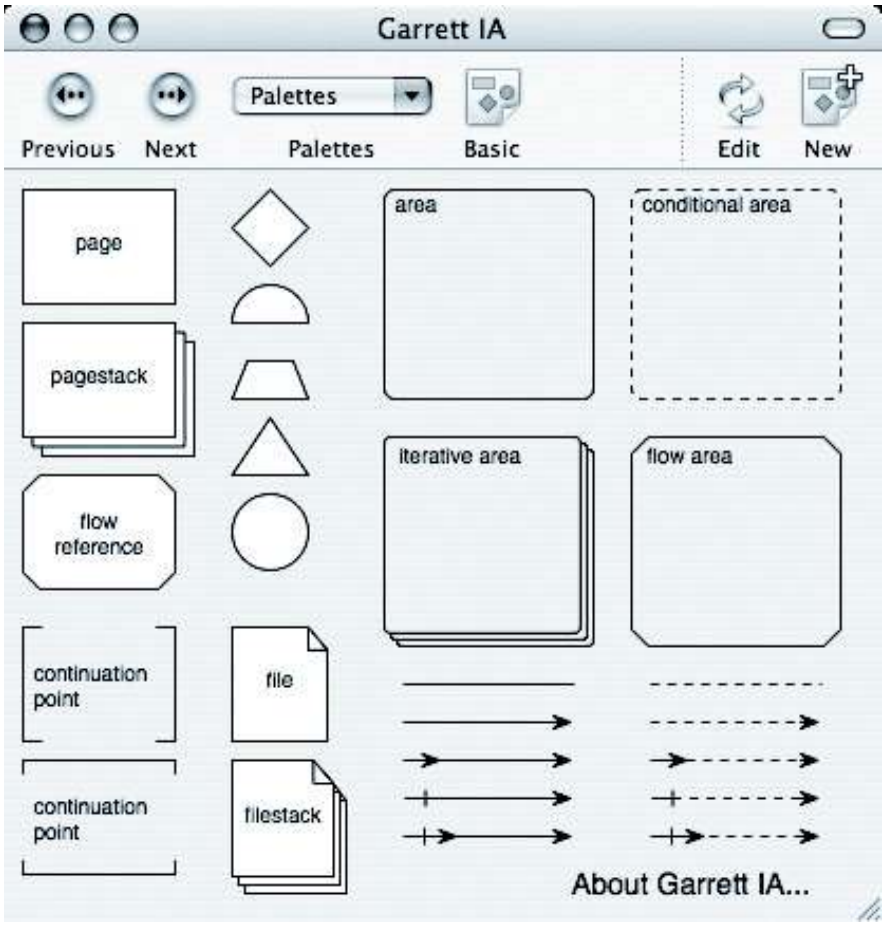


Most illustration toolslike Microsoft Visio or OmniGroup's OmniGraffleallow you to save individual shapes in a template or stencil so that you can reuse them. Once you have a visual language that

works, there's no point in reinventing the wheel.

Many designers and information architects have made their visual languages available publicly and for a variety of tools. If you're short on time, you can download one of these stencils and go from there. You'll find links to these resources on www.communicatingdesign.com .

Figure 8.11. OmniGroup's OmniGraffle for Macintosh comes with Jesse James Garrett's site mapping shapes.



Separate Different Parts of the Site onto Different Pages

One way to tame the site map beast is to break it up across several different pages. Separating each logical section of content onto a different page makes the map easy to understand because each page is more or less self-contained. A cover page can show how all the smaller site maps fit together.

Avoiding Missteps in Mapping Sites

As web sites become more complex and dense with information, it will be more difficult to capture all that information. This risk appears in several different ways.

Describing Links Between Pages

With even the simplest web sites, it can be difficult to show the extensive linking in site map form.

It's easy to get carried away, showing every possible link between one piece of content and another. Avoid this problem by deciding what links you want to represent, whether they are semantic/hierarchical relationships or physical links. In the case of physical links, you should focus only on those links that are most meaningful or most likely. Even though there may be links between pages at the lower levels, you can simplify your site map by only showing how someone would browse to each page from the home page.

Figure 8.12. This cover page ties together a site map that spans several different pages. It indicates page numbers for the supporting site mapsacting, in effect, as a table of contents.

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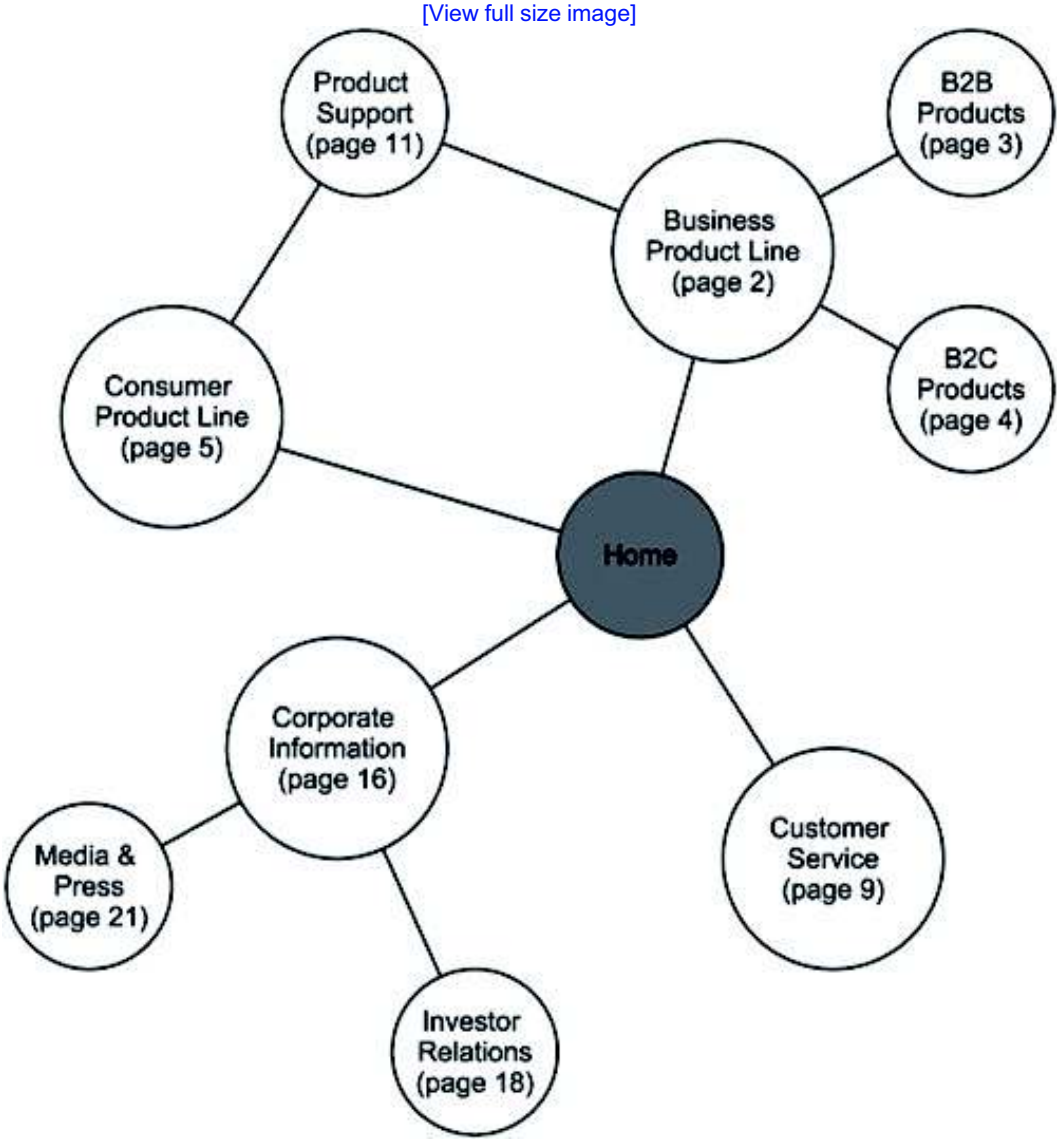

Defining Types of Pages

Web pages come in all shapes and sizes, despite your best efforts to put them in nice little buckets. As described in layer 2 , there are all kinds of properties your site map might illustrate, from the behind-the-scenes technology to project management issues. You may be tempted to pack as much information in as possibleafter all, it's a special feat to communicate lots of detail in a little space. On the other hand, this can make your site map dense and clumsy.

One way to show additional information about the pages is to create multiple versions of the site map. Before you groan about the difficulty of maintaining several different versions, consider the tools you're using to map the sitesome may offer features to make this easy. Microsoft Visio, for example, has a layering function that allows you to hide or show different parts of your drawing. Regardless of how you make it happen, you can create different versions that show different aspects, so one version might focus on the technical issues and another on the editorial issues.

Oversimplifying

You can also go in the other direction, showing too little information. You might not show enough detail about the site itself, missing categories of information or failing to account for pieces of content. Site maps play a role in this failure because they hide an underlying chaos of web sites. Seeing sites represented cleanly as boxes and lines makes it easy to forget the spaghetti-like structure that's really there. Your urge to make the site look clean on paper may overwhelm the need to capture the details accurately.

The best way to avoid oversimplification is to capture the data outside a site map first. A site map is a visual tool for representing data, nothing more. Before building a site map, perform a content audit or content inventory, creating a list of what you need to document. Even if your site map oversimplifies the site, you can always go back to the raw data to validate the visualization.

PREV NEXT

Presenting Site Maps

At some point you'll need to gather the project team together to discuss the site structure. A site map can be an effective document, but it contains complex and sometimes controversial information. The only way to work through these issues is through a meeting. Or two.

Setting the Agenda

With any design deliverable, there are three reasons to gather the troops together. At one extreme, you're simply providing an introduction to the document, expecting nothing in return. At the other extreme, you're expecting stakeholders or team members to apply their seal of approval. In the middle of the road, you are working with an incomplete document and seeking feedback.

Regardless of purpose, your meeting should include an account of the project contextwhere you are and where you're going. A site map, while providing some concrete information, can feel very abstract to participants and it can be easy to lose the thread of your design process. By telling a quick story at the beginning of the meeting, you can help project participants locate the site map in the overall project. You might say something like this:

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OK, we finished our content inventoryremember we went through the high points last weekand
we've been looking at all the content and have come up with a site structure. We'll look at
that today. This site structure is just a draft, and we intend to test it in the next few
weeks. We're working on devising the test mechanism and we can discuss that at the end of
this meeting or run through it at our status meeting on Wednesday.
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Introduction and Overview

What distinguishes an introduction meeting from the others is that you're not digging into the details of the site structure. The purpose of the meeting is to get the team on board with the document, educating them enough so they can look at it themselves. There are three key pieces of information you need to communicate.

First, you need to help them understand the document itself, especially the visual conventions you may be using. You don't need to walk them through the entire document, but you should point out major concepts and explain the visual systemwhat each of the shapes mean, how you've grouped things together, and other elements that might contain meaning. You might use a key, a box off to the side of the page that describes each symbol. Good visual design, they say, shouldn't require a key. But, frankly, I don't know who "they" are, and they're certainly not the ones in the room presenting the site map to your stakeholders.

Once you've given the participants an overview of how the document works, the next information to cover are the major design highlights. The intent of the meeting is not to run through every detail, but you still want to give meeting participants a sense of the key design decisions. To decide what counts as "key" or "major," think about which content areas will be the most surprising to stakeholders, and which represent important areas for customers. Working on a site for a major airline a few years ago, my team consolidated disparate customer service information under a single heading. This was one of the things pointed out in the presentation because it represented a new direction for the site.

Finally, you'll need to provide meeting participants with some background information, in other words, the key inputs that went into building the site map. This can include an overview of the user

personas or results from user research. If you've done some analysis of content types and are distinguishing between them in the site map itself, your meeting participants will benefit from an overview of the different types. It never hurts to recap project goals. Any bit of information you used as part of the design process for creating the structure is fair game.

Feedback and Brainstorming

The structure of a web site generates lots of conversation, but spend enough time in this business and you'll realize that every design decision is charged with ego and politics. In a meeting where the purpose is to solicit feedback on a site map, the challenge is to make the feedback constructive. This means, of course, distinguishing legitimate structural feedback from feedback that comes from outside the business requirements and objectives. (Unless the business objectives of your site include satisfying stakeholder ego.)

If this is the first time the team has seen the site map, you may need to cover some of the introductory stuff from the overview meeting. Otherwise, there are two kinds of information you need to dig into for a feedback meeting.

First, you need to be clear about the kind of feedback you're looking for. A free-for-all doesn't help anybody. If you haven't finalized the labeling scheme, be clear that you welcome suggestions, but that the focus of the meeting is the site structure. If you are seeking feedback on labeling, you might want to give the meeting participants a handful of choicestwo or threeand have them select one. Leaving it completely open will lead to circular, unproductive conversations.

If you're seeking structural feedback, you need to be clear about the structural issues that require input. For example, the lower levels of a site may be well squared away, and you need to focus on the priorities of the main sections of the site. Or perhaps you've got a piece of content that could fit in several different places on the site and you need to know where its primary home is.

The other kind of information you need to address in a feedback meeting is the motivation for the design decisions your team has made, either structural or labeling. That will help the participants understand that the site map wasn't created in a vacuum. Walking through the site map and offering explanations for decisions shows that there's a reason for everything on the map. Team members and stakeholders will be less likely to offer unsubstantiated feedback.

Buy-In and Approval

If you need approval on a site map, the buy-in meeting shouldn't be the first time the stakeholders or team members see the site map. The buy-in meeting should be, to a great extent, nominalthat is, you should already know the outcome. The best way to ensure a smooth acceptance of your work is to keep the stakeholders and other team members involved with it from the very beginning. You're not only getting their input as you go, but you've also given them a sense of ownership, such that rejecting the site map would be rejecting their own work.

Structuring Meetings

Site maps can be very elaborate and complex. Merely splaying one in front of your project team and "talking about it" does not make for successful meetings. Think about how you want to structure the conversation and the best way to discuss the ideas represented by the site map. Two possible approaches are narrativeusing the site map to structure a story where the users are the main charactersor by content areaswhere you simply move from category to category and describe each one.

Narrative

The narrative approach starts with users. To structure your meeting in this way, begin by reminding the project team who the users are and why they're coming to the site. Each "chapter" in this story is a different user or a different collection of user needs. For each type of user, show how the site structure supports their needs. If your client has prioritized the user groups, start with the highest priority group. If not, you can start with the user profile that represents the most common tasks or scenarios.

For example, most government web sites need to support two broad groups of users: some users are "in the business," so to speak, and follow the government's regulatory and policy activities, while other users are simply citizens who need to understand how to interact with their government on specific issues. Using the narrative approach to describe a .gov site for a particular agency, the team would start with the Policy Wonk and show how that user can follow the inner workings of the government organization. The team would next turn to the Disinterested Citizen, who has a specific concern for a specific topic, and show how the site structure supports a highly targeted scenario.

Content Areas

It can be challenging to organize your meeting around how people use the site. In the ideal world, every piece of content on your site matches up perfectly with every possible scenario, but reality shows that this isn't always the case. (This isn't to say that it's OK for your site to include useless content, just that structuring your meeting around usage scenarios may not be the most efficient use of time.) A more practical approach, especially if you want to be sure to cover every part of the site, is to walk through each content area, one at a time. Start at the first level and dig down through each one.

To create a meaningful organization scheme for the meeting, you can prioritize the content areas by risk. More "risky" content areas are those that perhaps represent the greatest shift from the existing site structure, or those that will require the most investment of time and resources from the client and project team.

Of course, this kind of meeting can be very tedious. Sifting through every layer of detail in the site can be mind numbing, and is definitely not the best use of everyone's time. Instead, point out the highlights and describe what kinds of content ended up in each section. Instead of reading every label on every box, ask participants if you've used labels that they don't understand.

Imagine you're working on a .gov site for the Office of Meaningless Bureaucracy. (Any resemblance between this fictional agency's initials and those of an actual government agency is purely coincidental.) Your client for OMB is its Director of Communications, and you're sitting down with her to walk her through the proposed site structure. OMB, inherent to its mission, has lots of information on its site, but you don't want to waste the whole meeting hitting every piece of information. Instead, you say something like:

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The current site divides content up by type, giving each one its own category, like
"Policies" and "Regulations" and "Directives." We've re-categorized the information based on
issue. This approach will help the web site scale to accommodate new information, as well as
easily archive old information as issues become less relevant over time. We're proposing you
launch with the following broad categories of information…
```

After listing the categories, you would continue:

```
You'll find that we've reshuffled the content so that policies and regulations and other
types of content are not distinguished explicitly in the hierarchy. These distinctions would
happen at the page level. Instead, each category is further categorized. For example, under
"homeland security," we have the following sub-categories…
```

The meeting would not require you to walk through all the subcategories. Instead, you've provided a set of guidelines for how they can review the categorization on their own time. If there are categories

of content that you think will be controversial, you should point them out, giving stakeholders an opportunity to make suggestions right then and there.

When Maps Steer You Wrong

The challenges of site maps really come out when you're discussing them with other people, especially those who have different ideas of how the site can be structured. Unlike other areas of the design process, creating a site structure can seem like a somewhat arbitrary process to the untrained eye, and therefore easy to modify without considering the consequences.

Getting Stuck on Labels

One of the hardest things to get meeting participants to do is divorce structure from labels. A label on your site map refers to a category, but it may not be the exact wording you use on the site. Thinking of the structure before you hash out the categories is a perfectly legitimate approach and process. But to meeting participants, the labels can be a distraction. Still, if this is the worst thing that happens during your meeting, consider yourself lucky (see the next section).

To mitigate this risk, you might build the site map to make the labels look like placeholders. Parentheses or brackets can help with this. You can also include several alternatives, in order to show that you're considering several possibilities for the label of a section. Ultimately, the goal is to diffuse escalating tension that comes from purposeless conflict. When people argue about labels without any real foundation for validating their choices, meetings lose steam and take on a competitive atmosphere rather than a collaborative one.

On the other hand, perhaps your agenda includes exploring labels. In this case, you want to make sure the conversation with meeting participants generates meaningful feedback. Going round and round on different names for categories wastes time and makes everyone frustrated. Ideally, your users will validate label names, but you can use your meeting to brainstorm suggestions.

The Politics of Hierarchy

Creating a structure for a web site brings out the worst in organizational politics, which is why so many web sitesespecially in the early dayswere organized around corporate structure. To validate the site structure, you may need to bring all the different players to the table, and these people won't want to see "their" content buried deep in the site while someone else's content is at the surface.

Even if you're not facing such bald-faced political discussions any moreat least a few people learned their lessons from the proliferation of poorly designed sitescompeting agendas or misconceptions about user priorities can still skew the feedback you receive.

Deflating arguments about categorization based on office politics is no easy task. As in most tough situations, it can be useful to rely on user research or business goals to redirect conversation. If you haven't agreed on a common understanding of users or on the purpose of the site, it can be difficult to argue about which content is most important. This scenario presents a good opportunity for you to discuss the importance of setting business goals or criteria for judging priority, but your stakeholders might at this point just think you're being pedantic. (No one likes to hear "I told you so…")

If you can't steer the stakeholders in the right direction, your next line of defense is to show examples of well-designed and poorly designed site structures. Ideally, your examples will fall into a realm well outside the expertise of your stakeholders. This way, they can see how obscure a site can be to users not well versed in the lingo. For example, you might take your government client to the site of a high-tech manufacturerthe more obscure the technology the better. Instead of making your client walk through this sitewhich can be embarrassing and perhaps backfire if they're as geeky as you aredo some role-playing, pretending to be an average consumer looking for a new camcorder.

Draw parallels between the high-tech site's jargony language and that of the government agency.

Your last line of defense is to generate two prototypes, one based on the political compromise and another based on user-centered design principles. Even if you can't do full-fledged user testing, you can walk your stakeholders through each approach and show how one supports user goals better than the other.

PREV NEXT

Site Maps in Context

One of the nice things about site maps is that they've very familiar. More than ten years into the web business, site maps are among the documents that have the longest history and most exposure. Because of this, they are useful tools in various circumstances, providing a backdrop for other ideas in the design process, or serving as a basis for comparison.

Using Site Maps with Other Documents

As you read this section, think of a site map as more than just a representation of a specific site. Think of it as a convention for representing structures of information. In this sense, site mapping is a tool you can use in a variety of documents to draw attention to relevant structures.

Site Maps and User Needs Documentation

Creating a new site structure obviously depends on having an understanding of users, but site maps can be used in user needs documents like usability test results to provide further context. In usability test results, for example, a site map can show users' preferred path through a web site. Chapter 4 includes an example of this.

Site Maps and Strategy Documents

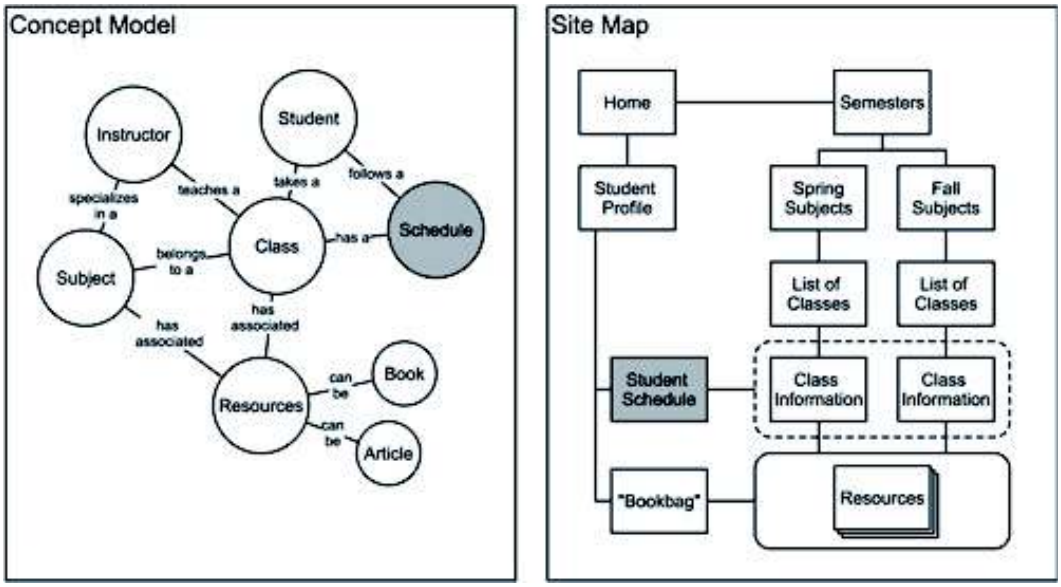
Strategy documents provide background information necessary for doing design work. By integrating a site map into these documents, you show how the strategic groundwork relates specifically to the site structure.

For example, instead of presenting a site map on its own, you can present it next to a concept model. The concept model describes the different types of content on the site and the site map shows how those content types work together.

A site map can be a useful tool for comparing the structures of competitive sites. Color coding can show how the same information is positioned differently on different sites.

Figure 8.13. In this very simple example, the concept model shows the basic relationships between different "objects" for an educational institution. Without color, it's difficult to show how all those concepts translate to a site map, so in this case, the site map just shows how a schedule appears on the site. More sophisticated sites and concept models may need more elaborate ways of drawing connections between them.

[View full size image]



Site Maps and Other Design Documents

Since site maps are among the first documents created in the design process, they can provide context for the rest of your design work. Lined up with wireframes or screen designs, site maps can help the project team see where a particular screen fits into the overall user experience.

Figure 8.1s. Stephen Anderson of Geniant has an elegant way of referencing wireframes with site maps. This example shows how he includes an excerpt and then highlights the relevant page. Image courtesy of Stephen Anderson.

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The Web's Cartographic Conundrum

Of all the documents in this book, the site map has the least hopeful future. Site maps are products of a time when web sites were more static, and when a site's content was more easily quantifiable. Site maps suggest a view of web sites as simple information environments created and maintained by a centralized authority. Most people think of moving about a web site as moving through physical space. A site map is appealing because it corroborates this metaphor, representing the connections between different areas on the site.

While sites like these probably won't go away any time soon, newer technologies permit a looser relationship between a site and its content. Some web sites have little predictable structurethis it true, for example, of sites that act as repositories for user-contributed content. Some sites, like weblogs, have predictable structures but no hierarchy of information. Site maps, therefore, have the difficult challenge of representing more and more complex information spacesones that don't resemble physical space.

Is the site map up to the challenge? It's doubtful. Conceptual models and user flows are better positioned to address this need. A structure of discrete and definable pages may still have value for simple web sites that don't push the boundaries of technology and our interactions with it. But as more web sites move away from strict repositories of centralized information, the site map will be replaced with more meaningful conventions. Still, while this progression seems inevitable, it is also difficult to imagine thatin our lifetimewe'll see the complete extinction of this kind of site.

PREV NEXT