

Save the Pixel

the art of simple
web design



:-) Thanks

Save the Pixel was made possible with the support of a talented group.

Lizzie Hunt, a wonderful partner and support through months of writing.

Dan Johnson, a fine designer & production guru at Scratchmedia.

Tim Bradburn, my writing partner on the initial drafts.

Marguerite Voss, my brilliant copy editor for the 2nd edition.

Also **Harvey Beck** at **Active Allowance**, **Jim Spencer** at **JBS Partners**, **Paul Doerwald** at **New Media Toolshed**, **Joey Pritikin** at **Fidelica**, **Rodney Brim** at **I Hate Clowns**, **Nick Albright** at **Alternative Energy Store**, **David Crankshaw** at **Geonexus**, **Nick Finck**, **Ana Luiza Bergamini** at **Ingles Online**, and all our friends at **Sunhome.biz**, **Buildium.com**, **Hexagon**, **VisionProject**, **Moraware**, **Tariq Qamar MD** at **QVision**, **IPNewsflash**, **Nosuni**, **LovingArms**, **BoldChat**, **Reed Business Information**, **WebTalent**, **Bokahotell**, and **TraceTracker**, **LowPriceLessons**, **Kathink.co.uk**, **Frederick's Ice Creams**, **Abeo Technical Solutions**, **Emissions Logic**, **HMC Electrical**, **Skinner**, **ProShow Exhibitions**, **BankLoans.com**, who kindly allowed us to publish their case studies & screenshots.

Alan Cooper, for permission to reference his work on interaction design.

David Rüder, **Gemma Barnes**, **Paul Bell**, **Anne Nortcliffe**, **Howie Jacobson**, **Wendy Sharp**, **Lou Rosenfeld**, **Jurgen Nijhuis**, **Trish Foley**, and many others for support, proofreading, and intelligent input along the way.

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1 *Preface:* Master the Art of Simple Web Design

*"See first that the design is wise and just:
that ascertained, pursue it resolutely;
do not for one repulse forego the purpose
that you resolved to effect."*

William Shakespeare

The Purpose of this Book

You can easily find loads of stuff in books or online to inspire you about beautiful graphics, and plenty of technical know-how on CSS, HTML and code. But if you want to find out how to be a web designer, structure a site that succeeds, decide on layout and craft pages that work, there are very few resources available.

Designing web sites that work is not hard to do. The things you need to do to achieve an effective web site are simple and logical. They require no innate talent, and they can be learnt quickly by anyone.

You CAN design great web sites

The steps in this book are drawn from my experience in creating professional web layouts over the last 15 years. I've made enough mistakes to figure out the basic rules of what works, what doesn't, and why. You can skip all the mistakes I've made.

(The essence of the "Save the Pixel" approach is to focus solely on the purpose of your communication, to craft a dialogue with your visitors that achieves the site's goals by letting them achieve theirs, to use only those elements you need to use to help visitors find the path that leads them to their goals. Simplicity is the thread that joins each of these steps.)

I've distilled all my experience of web design into this short book for YOU. Follow my step-by-step guide and you will have all the knowledge you need to master the art of simple web design.

What this book will give you

Save the Pixel takes you through a crash course in simple design for the web, through a series of worked examples. Reading this book will give you:

- **Insight** into professional web design discipline that will help you create successful web sites and page designs with less time and effort
- **Principles** to help you select the design solution that's most likely to work, and to direct your creative energy effectively

- Dozens of **practical techniques** and tips on information architecture, page layout, copywriting, graphic design etc.

Simple solutions

The goals of each web design can vary greatly from one project to the next, but we should always strive for **efficiency** and **simplicity**. This will deliver a cleaner result that facilitates accurate communication with less margin for error. It also takes less work to make something simple than it does to make something complex.

When crafting a web page, I aim to use as few “**things**” as I need to achieve the purpose. “Things” includes pages, words, pictures, choices, gradients, borders, boxes, graphics, columns etc. etc..

This helps make each step seem more obvious and **feel easy**.

Feeling easy is more important than being easy. In a way, it's more real than actual practical ease of use, because we're more likely to persevere and succeed with something we think is easy than something that seems a bit more complicated.

Chopping complex processes into simpler steps, makes them feel easier, which in turn can lead to more success.

This approach isn't new. Economy has always been one of the core disciplines in Art and in Design. The Old Masters were masters of economy. Look at the brush strokes on an old painting, and you'll see how much people achieved with so few strokes.

It's not that they didn't have the talent, or the time, to do more strokes, it's just that they knew that using as few strokes of the brush as possible to create the desired effect produces the best result. Using rougher strokes on areas like backgrounds or material on clothing helps the eye to focus on the finer detail.

The same goes for web design. While your mode of interaction with a web site is very different to a painting, a lot of the principles that artists have used for centuries can apply to any medium. Web designers should follow the same discipline to apply only as much detail as is necessary, and putting it where it's most needed, to manage viewers' attention.

Saving pixels

Edward Tufte is an American thinker who has probably explored the visual communication of information more deeply than anyone in history. When Tufte writes about communication in print, he refers to “saving your ink”, meaning that you should use as little “ink” as you can to get the information across.

He also differentiates between “data-ink” and “non-data-ink”, stressing the importance of maximising the proportion of data-ink (i.e. visual marks that carry meaning) over non-meaningful non-data-ink. In other words, if you can use one less line, one less dot, one less word, while retaining the meaning, you should.

In web design, we don’t use ink. We use pixels. Join me on the campaign to **Save the Pixel**.

When you’re designing, use only as many images, lines, CSS definitions, boxes, pages, forms, changes in colour, changes in style, etc. as you need to get your stuff across. Always assume that your visitor’s attention span is limited, and that knowledge will help guide your choices.

Yeah, yeah, something about attention span

Like an elevator pitch for a new business, a sales pitch on the street, or a billboard ad, if you can get your message across in ten seconds, why take twenty? If you can do it in 9, why take 10?

When someone arrives at a web site, you have a limited amount of attention available. How much time that equates to is unknown. It depends on the competition, visitor’s expectations, and how badly they need what your site offers. And when you only have a limited amount of attention, there is a limit to the number of signals you can convey. So aim to make every signal relevant, significant, and helpful.

The more efficiently you can communicate what you have to get across, the more likely you are to keep your visitor’s attention, and the greater your chance of success. If you can increase sales, conversions, or brand retention by 5%, that’s a win. We should never accept second-best.

Your job is firstly to make the visitor **trust your web site**, by making your web page “**getable**”, so that your visitor believes “I'm in the right place to get what I want”. This means you first need to have insight into your visitor's goals, and the triggers that will give them positive vibes, with a brand and a message that's immediately accessible. If you can achieve that, they will look for the next step.

Then your job is to **keep the scent**, so that they continue to think, “I'm going to get what I want here”. You've got a limited opportunity to do that. If they feel overwhelmed, or decide for any other reason that they're not going to get what they've come for, you could lose them. Focus on making the next steps forward obvious and easy, and you'll keep them moving smoothly towards their own goals (and achieving your goals along the way). The key factors here are managing **noticeability** on every page with a mind to saving the pixel, laying out visual elements in an economical and readable way, and making optimal use of imagery and words.

“Enough, and no more”

One of the touchstones of my design philosophy is “enough and no more”. How many pages does your site need? How many options? How many paragraphs should it take to describe something? How many icons, pictures, photos, headings, lines, drop-downs, callout boxes, shiny gradients, logos, colours, columns etc. etc. etc. does your site need? The answer's always the same: **Enough and no more**.

All you need to do is enough. You need to provide enough images and information for your visitor to know they're still on the right site, enough options to be able to choose the next step forward with confidence... And no more!

One thing too many may overload your visitor's attention span.

Pixel-saving discipline

Get into the habit of challenging every single design decision, asking: Can it be made simpler, without losing the essence of what the page has to achieve?

Every bit of complexity that you add to a page brings with it the risk of breaking your visitor's attention span. Every element that could draw the eye, every box, every line, every pixel, should be there for a reason.

- Does it convey important information?
- Does it contribute significantly to the brand?
- Does it help your visitor know “I'm in the right place” or “This is the way to get what I want”?

Simplifying every visual element brings numerous advantages:

- It's quicker to implement less than more, which means you can take more time to concentrate on understanding the business challenge, getting into your visitors' heads, clarifying goals, and getting the big picture.
- Less is much easier to code than more. A flat coloured box is much easier and quicker to code than a shiny box with rounded corners and a shadow.
- Simpler pages take fewer resources to download, and less bandwidth, so they render more quickly. That increases your success rate too.
- You'll always need to make changes. It's easier to change less than it is to change more.

Success = Attention ÷ Stuff

Occam's Razor is a logic principle that says:

“Given any two solutions to the same problem, all other things being equal, the simplest solution is the best.”

In other words, if you can achieve the same effect with less, do it.

If I could sum up Save the Pixel in one sentence, it would be:

Likelihood of success is proportional to amount of visitor attention, divided by the amount of stuff they have to look through to get what they need next.

Now, we can't do much about attention: it's pretty much a finite resource (although we should do our best to keep our visitors alert, awake and eager). We have **much** more control over the amount of stuff on each page.

The Pro Designer mindset

"Save the pixel" sums up my whole design philosophy. The more simply you can achieve what you need to do, the better. (It may help to imagine that pixels are a precious resource.)

"A recent UN report estimates that, at the present rate of consumption, the world supply of pixels will be exhausted by the year 2050."

Pro designers learn to work smart. They do **as little action** as possible to achieve what needs to be done, and use **as much thought** as is required to be able to do this.

The general approach goes like this:

1. What the heck it is you're doing here?
2. How are you going to achieve it by helping other people achieve what they want to do?
3. What steps need to happen, and what information needs to be communicated?
4. Then how do you arrange everything onto pages in such a way that your messages are communicated effectively, and everyone can easily find their way to what they want from any starting point?

This process starts with you as a designer getting your head in the right place.

Design isn't Art (creating beautiful or thought-provoking things for the sake of it).

Design is a discipline – creating communication with a purpose.

In this book I'll start with the core stuff – you, your mind, and your design discipline. There's a world of skills you *could* learn; some are more useful than others, none is essential. But, whatever your skill set, if you can learn how to apply a few simple positive disciplines, you'll work more effectively and make the most of your time and energy.

Design the content, not the box it comes in

Use your pixels on things that communicate meaning. It used to be very common for web designers to make just templates – attractive or jazzy containers which would have “content” added at a later time. This is a fundamentally wrong approach, because it doesn't fulfil the designer's mission - facilitating communication.

If you find yourself decorating the package, rather than crafting real, meaningful content, stop & ask: “Are these pixels best used here?”

You want the visitor to focus on the **navigation & content** as that's where the signposts are that point to the goals.

If a design feature makes it 1% more likely that someone's eye will be drawn to a non-useful visual element, the only way it can go is that more people will be lost. Either they'll get fed up & give up at that point, run out of time, get confused, or guess and take a wrong turn and then get confused.

It's a percentage game, and it's the designer's job to optimise the percentages to get more people through to satisfactory outcomes.

“Packaging” elements that are repeated on every page are pretty dead, in the sense that they communicate once and then get ignored and can't communicate much more. So pixels spent on decorating the “box” are less effective. (Of course, some things need to be communicated on every page – to help answer the question, “Am I in the right place?”.)

Drawing the eye to dead features is counter-productive. The modern approach is to keep the branding/box design strong but minimal, devoting more energy and pixels to **content**.

Case Study 1: I Hate Clowns

In this first redesign, the original site used a large amount of detail to design the package – the stuff around the content that's the same on every page.

Original



Intense colour around the edges of the screen draws the eye away from content. You're drawn to the clown image, and the intense darks of the products down the right edge.

Notice how hard it is to focus on the main content in the middle of the page, or understand what's available on the site by scanning the navigation.

Redesign



The redesign uses far fewer pixels, but they're employed to focus attention on meaningful content. Because there's less overall to look at, the features that are on the page can be stronger and clearer. The main heading is very large and clear, the text is more readable, and the navigation is obvious, giving you an instant overview of what's on the site. While everything is bigger and bolder, the overall effect is easier on the eye, because there's less busyness on the screen.

Think-Then-Do

“Think-Then-Do” is a key component of my design process. It's centred around the 2 specific activities you have as a designer: **decision-making** and **execution**, and combining them to produce the best results as efficiently as possible.

1. Think

The first part of the cycle is strictly hands-off. It involves sitting back, looking at your design or problem with fresh eyes, then deciding quickly, boldly and objectively “what needs to be done”.

Forget that you're the one who's going to have to do it. Make bold decisions as though someone else will carry out the work.

Separating **thinking** from **doing** can help you bravely face the real core of the problem. Does it all need throwing away & starting again? Is the layout fundamentally flawed? Are the colours wrong? Is there the wrong number of pages? Should this site actually be two sites?

Make clean, correct decisions, then **switch hats** and proceed to step 2...

2. Then Do

Once you're clear what needs to be done, stop all analysis, and apply the **JFDI** process (“Just F***ing Do It”).

Do your job, as though your boss has told you what you have to do, and you have no choice in the matter. (In this discipline, the Think part of you *is* the boss.) The trick is to work rapidly and selflessly, without criticism, just moving forward.

3. Repeat

Once you've done what your Thinking brain specified, take a break, do something else, then go back again & repeat the process, starting again with thinking.

It's difficult to do both these steps at the same time. It's often really hard to analyse and make decisions while you're working on something, and there's a tendency to take what seems to be the option that requires less work, even if it sometimes means avoiding difficult problems.

In fact, it can be much **quicker** and **more efficient** to work this way, even when it involves taking big decisions that lead to drastic action. If the tanker is heading the wrong way, although it's hard to turn it around, the sooner you do turn it around, the sooner you'll reach your destination.

When you're working with a clear, balanced purpose in mind, subsequent decisions seem to flow much more easily. Trying to build a solution from the wrong foundations is like swimming upstream – everything is hard work.

Keep fresh eyes

Think-then-do requires you to work in multiple short bursts of thinking and doing.

This helps you to avoid what I call “screen-blindness”. You may recognise the effect if you've ever spent several hours working on a design. The longer you work, results seem to come more slowly. You find yourself sitting staring at the screen, pushing pixels around one way than back again. You lose touch with what it is you're trying to do. You're screen-blind.

Later, you come back to the design after a break, and you just “see” what's right and wrong! You sit down, and five minutes later the design is almost done. This is think-then-do at work.

One of the clearest indicators of screen-blindness, for me at least, is the tendency to reduce the tonal contrast in a design. When we look at web pages in the real world, we're scanning for clues to what we want, and pages benefit from plenty of crisp contrast to help you tell things apart quickly and easily. When you've been staring at a design for too long, strong contrast and colour can start to feel too much, and you find yourself softening everything. Look out for this sign, and take a break whenever you sense it happening.

When you follow think-then-do, you only start working on a design with a clear intent in mind. And you stop when you've achieved what you were going to do. Then, it's good to walk away and do something else for a short time, come back and Think again. Then Do. Repeat until done.

Case Study 2: JBS Partners

JBS Partners is the marketing site of web consultant Jim Spencer. Jim told me his site needed a redesign to bring it more up to date. Jim is someone who loves to work closely with clients, sharing his broad experience in business and marketing. However, Jim's old home page didn't communicate the personal touch that typifies the way he works. The branding was disjointed.

Original

The content of Jim's site suffers from being hard to notice. What do you notice first?

The screenshot shows the JBS Partners website. At the top, there's a blue header bar with the company name "JBS PARTNERS" in white, bold letters. Below the name is a sub-headline "Web Sites that You Control". The main menu includes links for Portfolio, Hosting, Domain Names, Search Engine Optimization, and Other Services. A navigation bar at the bottom offers links for home and contact form. The central content area features a testimonial from Michael A Sciarra, a quote from Unique Foreign Auto Care, and sections for Consulting, Guidance, Listening, Primary Services (Hosting), Web Site Design, Domain Names, and a Contact Us form.

Web Site Design, Domain Names, Hosting and SEO Consulting.

JBS Partners creates custom designed web sites for small businesses and offers web site hosting and private domain name registration.

We Can Help

You know the power of the Internet. You know that billions of dollars are being spent shopping online and you will not be left behind. You are also not ready to enroll in the lifetime of learning required to keep up with the standards on the web and in e-commerce.

Consulting

That is where JBS Partners comes in. We provide the technical skills and non-technical explanations that allow our customers to make the right decisions in a consultative, partnering arrangement. We can help you evaluate the many choices regarding design, features, maintenance, functionality and marketing on the Internet.

Guidance

- Is it time to purchase a new domain name that better describes your business?
- Are you tired of mailing out newsletters and paying for postage and printing when you could be doing online?
- Is your web site ready to be optimized so that the search engines, and therefore your customers, can find you?

Listening

We ask lots of questions and we listen to your answers. Once we know where you are and where you are going, and why, then we can begin to discuss the best tools, technologies and resources to get you where you want to go.

Primary Services

Hosting

We provide our own hosting solution in a world class datacenter. This has proved to be very successful for our customers.

We offer the cPanel suite of tools and especially appreciate the detailed statistical information provided by awstats.

The statistical information is invaluable for those customers that are interested in Internet marketing, search engine optimization and marketing their web site.

Web Site Design

We have a talented pool of designers. Our design services focus on your target visitor and the search engines. To see some our work please visit the [Websites](#) page.

The use of rich color, pleasing shapes, and the appropriate size and positioning of all elements contribute to the simple clean lines that our customers rave about. Providing links where one would expect result in clear and trustworthy navigation that gets people to the information they want in the fewest number of clicks possible.

Domain Names

We can help you choose an effective name, register your domain name(s) at half the price of the big name resellers and point the domain name to your web site.

Is the domain name memorable?

Contact Us

What is your name? _____

What is your email? _____

What is your phone number? _____

What way is best to contact you? _____

What time is best to contact you? _____

What is the nature of your business? _____

What would you like to talk about?

a new domain name
 web site hosting
 building a new web site
 updating an existing web site
 key word research
 search engine optimization
 adding functionality to my web site
 my existing internet situation
 Other

If you selected other, please tell us what you'd like to talk about: _____

You may be contacting us about a number of things. What is your highest priority?

What else would you like us to know? _____

Submit

Your first impression is dominated by the solid blue bar, and the graphic of the 2 businesspeople walking. This graphic has little informational value, and the colour feels cold & remote.

For a home page, this has an awful lot of plain text. The long lines of text make the content tiring to read, and you actually have to read to understand what the site's about. It's not possible to skim the page for simple clues that give you the big picture.

While the content is valuable, there's little to help draw the eye to the information. It doesn't matter how interesting your information is, all content benefits from markers to help you skim for clues to what's available.

Redesign

While everything has been made easier to read, mainly by showing less text but making it bigger, notice how the more meaningful elements (headings & navigation) are more prominent.

Although the site has a strong visual mood, the content is also much more noticeable and readable, thanks to strong headings, reduced amount of text on the page, larger font size and shorter line length.

The screenshot shows a website layout with a light blue header and footer. The header contains the logo 'JBS Partners' and the main title 'Marketing Your Business Online'. Below the header is a navigation bar with links for 'HOME', 'RESOURCES', 'About JBS Partners', and 'Contact'. The main content area features a large, stylized heading 'Our Guide to... Buying a Domain Name'. A text box below it contains placeholder text: 'Lorem Ipsum is simply dummy text of the printing and typesetting industry.' To the right is a sidebar titled 'RESOURCES' with a list of links under 'Domain names': 'selecting a name', 'buying a name', and 'about top-level domains'. Other sidebar categories include 'Search engine marketing', 'Search engine optimization', 'Taking payment online', 'Usability', 'WebHosting', 'Web Marketing', and 'Your web site'. At the bottom of the page is a dark footer bar with links for 'Home', 'Resources', 'About JBS Partners', and 'Contact us'.

2 Why are we here?

*"If one does not know to which port one is sailing,
no wind is favourable."*

Seneca (5 BC - 65 AD)

Know your goal

Knowing your purpose is the most important step in any process. It applies to everything you do as a designer. Before you start anything, it's vital to know where you're going, so you know what direction to set off in, and when to stop.

Design is the conscious creation of a new solution to a problem or need.

Therefore: If you aren't clear on the problem, you can't design your way forward.

(Creating something for its own sake is art, and that's not what this book is about.)

Before embarking on any project, it pays to get totally 100% clear on what you aim to achieve – your goal. What will it be like once it's finished? What will be different? How will you feel?

A state of being

Remember, **a goal is a state of being, not a state of doing**. It isn't something you **do**, it's somewhere you **arrive**. So “designing a cool web site” isn't a goal. Lots of talented designers have that purpose and never stop redesigning their sites, because they simply get what they ask for, “doing”.

A true goal is **the place you'll be** once you've achieved what you're doing. Just visualising your end point is a kind of magic that helps your mind automatically and invisibly rewire itself to figure out the path ahead, and the next steps.

A common misconception among web designers is that it's their job to stop every visitor in their tracks, leaving them open-mouthed at the beauty and elegance of your web design. Sure, that's OK in an art gallery, but is it the purpose of your web site?

Let me be 100% clear. Stunning your visitor is NOT your job. Unless, of course, it is.

There lies the paradox. Occasionally, your purpose *may* simply be to wow someone with your skill. Most of the time, it isn't. But you can only know that if you're clear on your goal from the outset.

If you're involved in web site projects right now, for each try to picture what it will feel like to present it to the client or your boss, or to unveil it to the public. What exact words do people say? Why does the site work for them? What are people doing in response to the site? What feedback do you receive? How does that feel?

This will help you know where you're going. With your goal clear in your mind, what's the first step? You should find it comes quite easily.

Goals for web sites

A web site is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

People don't visit the iTunes site for the fun of browsing the site. They do it to get music at a fair price, so that they can **enjoy listening to the music**. Browsing is not the goal. The goal is what comes later - the enjoyment of the music. The website is just a vehicle to get visitors to that point.

When I log on to my online bank account, my goal isn't "to manage my finances". I don't enjoy managing my finances. I enjoy popping open a bottle of wine in the knowledge my finances are in order. My *goal* is "to know that my finances are in order". The online banking website's job is to **transport me to that knowledge and that bottle of wine as smoothly and quickly as possible!**

Once you're clear on what your purpose here is, but before you start actually making design decisions, get clear on the purpose and objectives of the web site. I find it works to express these in terms of goals as well.

Of course, the goals behind web sites vary enormously. This isn't the place to try to address every possible business strategy, but some general guidelines may be helpful.

Good goals should be:

- **Simple**
- **Realistic**
- **Specific**

Simple

Firstly, try to **reduce** and **simplify** goals, seeking to recognise the core intention, motivation, or foundations that underlie a tactical goal. A good trick can simply be to ask “Why?” or “How?” enough times until you get to an immutable core intent.

What do we want?

“We want a really cool web site”

Why?

“We want more people to find out about our products and buy from us”

Why?

“We want to sell more widgets to more companies.”

How?

“By becoming known as the most affordable brand of quality widgets.”

Having a cool web site could be a valid goal, but if there are deeper motives behind it, they'll be more useful to bear in mind as you make decisions about the web site.

If one result follows from another, look into the original achievements for specific and simple components that more directly apply to the task at hand.

For example, a web site's financial goal might be reached as a result of increased numbers of visitors combined with an improvement in conversion rate.

While the financial result is certainly important, profit or turnover could come about through other means, so it may not be as useful a goal as focusing on visitor numbers & conversion rate.

Realistic

A goal only works for you if you can believe in it and keep the vision in mind. If a goal is too ambitious, or doesn't truly reflect business intent, it can't really motivate.

It's better to choose modest goals and practice achieving them, than to be too ambitious and practice failure.

Specific

The market rewards leaders, and you can't be the best at 2 things. Most markets today are big and offer lots of choice. People tend to gravitate towards the most highly-recommended provider in any field.

Secondly, people also tend to need something specific, not something generic. While they may put a general term into a search engine, e.g. "Web designer Quebec", what they actually need is someone who's in their right price bracket, who does the right kind of work.

Plus it's more realistic and achievable to be the best at something specific than something general.

For example, it's more realistic to aim to be the best at creating accessible French-language web sites for public service organisations in Canada than it is to be the most sought-after web designer in Canada.

What you want to achieve on a web site can be quite general. "We want more people to be using the site to share their business information", for example. That's fine as a "want", but it isn't a goal. Attaching specific **success criteria** to your goals help focus the mind and intent much more.

Let's take the criterion, "500 new businesses per month are signing up on our site, and adding at least one location." That's much more useful, because it helps you:

1. Measure **how well you're doing** (how on track you are for success)
2. Visualise **what needs to happen** in order to increase your success rate

If you're only getting 100 new businesses to this point in a month, you know you're only 20% on track. You can also set milestones in your process (Google Analytics is a great way to help you do this), and measure how many people are getting to each point. You may spot sticking points in your stats, where more people are dropping out than you'd expect, which can help focus your analysis.

"More people are using the site..." wouldn't give you these benefits. By that measure, having an extra three visitors per month would constitute success, but would it mean success for the business?

Examples of sharpening goals

Woolly wording	Sharper, more useful wording
Sell more widgets.	“Sales to the automotive sector are up by at least 25% within 6 months.”
Make more profit.	“We have reduced the cost of acquiring each new customer by 20% over the year.”
Increase our brand recognition.	“We have improved the awareness of our brand so that, when we ran a quick survey at this year’s expo, at least 10% of people said they know who we are.”
Promote our products on the web	“Our product's key features (affordable, quirky, best at any price, safe bet etc.) are at the forefront of people's minds. 20% more survey respondents now mention one of these core values when asked to describe the product than last year.”
Have a presence on the web	“By the end of month 3, we get at least 30 enquiries from new prospective customers per month”
Get lots of visitors to our web site	“We're in the top 30 search results on Google.com for <term>, and get 100 unique visitors per day looking at our product specifications page”

Success Criteria

Try to go as far as to define specific success criteria, even including quantifiable numbers. Success criteria are useful in several ways:

1. The most important is that the **process** of defining what constitutes success makes you really think about what you can & want to achieve. You should come up with something that you believe is achievable, even if it's ambitious.
2. They give you a decision-making framework you can use throughout your project. When you and your client know what it will look like when you've got things right, you can visualise much more easily how to get there, and have a means to help choose between design options (e.g. it's much easier to decide which element on a screen should be more prominent, if you know what you want the web site and page to do). This will result in fewer arguments.
3. They give you something to measure your success by. If you have a documented success criterion that says, "Our client wanted a site that would help them increase sales from x to y within 3 months", and then your web site achieves that – that's fantastic PR/marketing material for you! If not, then it's a great opportunity to analyse why your goals weren't met and to learn.

Tips on setting goals

The way goals work is a kind of magic. When you define a goal, and keep it in mind, it is more likely to happen. This isn't just mumbo jumbo, there are very real reasons why it works. Seeing exactly where you're going helps you see the path ahead, which in turn gives you a structure to help you choose every step.

Clarifying all the complex requirements, wishes, ambitions, assumptions etc. about what a web site should do into a set of short, communicable goals is an exercise in simplicity itself.

The answers you get from exploring your goals may challenge your initial assumptions (or your client's). But it's always worthwhile pushing through, accepting the reality of the goals, and facing up to the challenge of how to get there. You don't want to stop short of success, but you don't want to spend more time and energy than necessary and risk overcooking the dish.

I often find myself working **backwards** from visualising a visitor successfully using the site I'm about to design/redesign. Starting with my imaginary visitor's brain responses, I imagine how they're *feeling* about the site they're using, and what they want to do next. From that, I start to *hear the words* that stand out on the screen that cause those responses, and even *see the colours and layout* that they find appealing, and the *navigation* they find so simple.

Think-then-do your goals

Always take time on goals and visualisation before you start. Resist the temptation to rush headlong into a design like some kind of crazy rodent. Much better to get a clear mind and then take the shortest, most direct route to the right end point. Visualising real people actually responding in a specific positive way is a very simple and quick mental exercise.

If you or your client don't have a clear goal, don't walk regardless. Stop & take stock, consider what success will look like, or feel like, and try to put that into words.

This doesn't mean to linger on planning stages. On the contrary! Visualising your goal is a very simple and short process, which will save you lots of time. This approach will help you complete your project with time, energy, and pixels to spare!

"In the words of the ancients, one should make his decisions within the space of seven breaths. Lord Takanobu said: If discrimination is long, it will spoil. Lord Naoshige said: When matters are done leisurely, seven out of ten will turn out badly. A warrior is a person who does things quickly.

"When your mind is going hither and thither, discrimination will never be brought to a conclusion. With an intense, fresh and undelaying spirit, one will make his judgements within the space of seven breaths. It is a matter of being determined and having the spirit to break right through to the other side."

Yamamoto Tsunetomo, Hagukare ("The Way of the Samurai")

Case Study 3: Geonexus.com

David Crankshaw is an expert in search engine optimisation and search marketing (SEO/SEM) who sells his consulting services to technology companies in Silicon Valley through his consulting company Geonexus.

David asked us to help redesign Geonexus' web site. The first thing we did was to go through some interview exercises to clarify what David's goals were, and then what the **goals of the web site** should be.

It was pretty easy going through this process with David. SEO professionals like David know all about goals, as the first thing that a good SEO consultant should always ask their own clients is what they want their campaign to achieve. (You could run a SEO or marketing campaign, for the same site, to do very different things, like increase traffic overall, or bring in a fewer but more highly-qualified visitors, or create a buzz etc.)

However, it's much harder to review and make decisions about your own site, which you live with every day. Everyone benefits from a fresh pair of eyes – even the professionals!

The goal of the web site turned out to be:

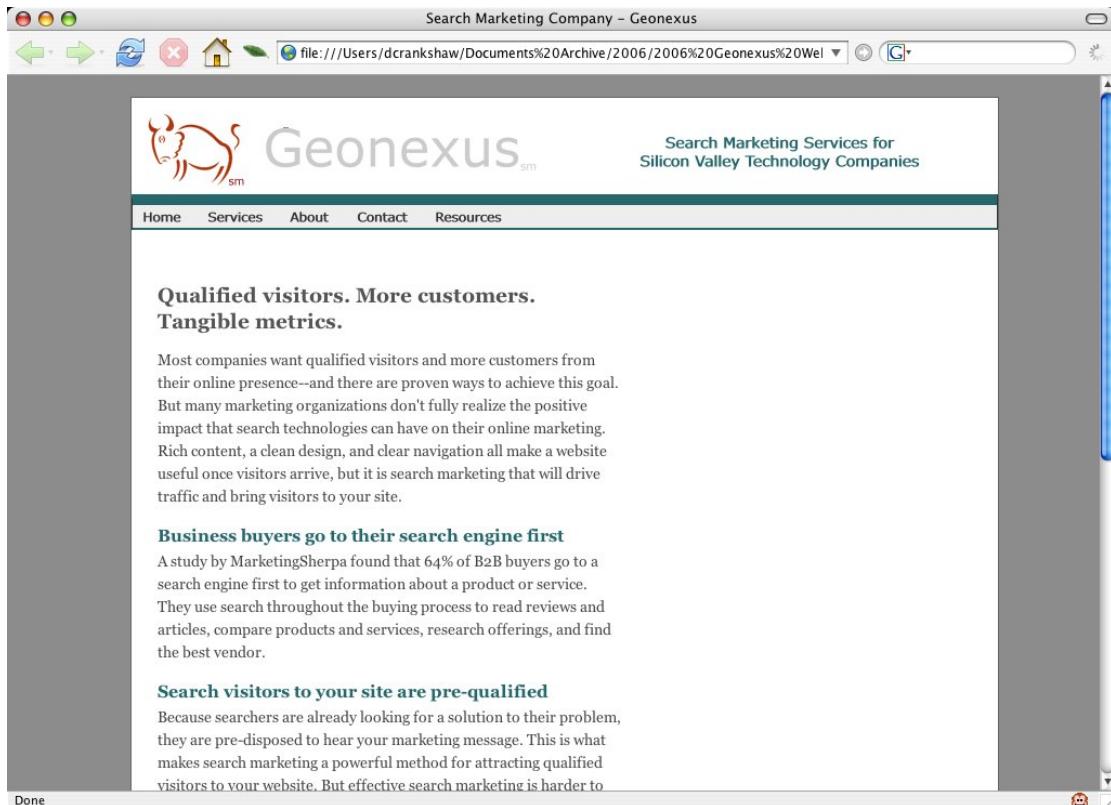
*"The site continues to attract **more** of the right kind of SEO/SEM contracts for Geonexus, from **more** of the right kind of Silicon Valley clients, while requiring **less marketing effort**"*

This goal led naturally to two requirements:

1. First of all, for the goal to become true it was clearly necessary for the web site to be **visited by more people**.
2. Then, those people needed to be **convinced** of Geonexus' and David's capability **to help companies like theirs**.

Original - Split personality

The original site looked very plain but stated its message and purpose quite clearly. However, the really useful free information is hidden in a section vaguely labelled “Resources”.



The most striking thing about the original Geonexus site was that it was doing **two things**. On one hand, it was the marketing front-end for Geonexus, the consultancy. At the same time, though, it offered a great selection of articles on search marketing, under the title “Search Marketing Handbook”. It was pretty obvious that these two things, represented almost by two separate brands, were pulling in opposite directions: the marketing side was promoting a commercial business, whereas the excellent articles were giving out free knowledge for the greater good. Once we realised that, it was quite easy to see that the best solution was to create 2 different web sites!

Redesign

The general style & branding of this redesign purposely evokes academic textbooks. It is designed to look authoritative and sober yet accessible.

The redesign is as much a re-working of the strategy as the site itself. The information from David's articles has been turned into a separate brand in its own right, The Search Marketing Handbook.



David now has two sites, each with its own clear goal. The Search Marketing Handbook has been split off onto its own domain, **searchmarketinghandbook.info**, and **geonexus.com** has become a very simple contact page for people wanting to get in touch with David. Each site does one thing well.

The Search Marketing Handbook is a dedicated resource with a brand and domain that convey exactly what it's all about. It's packed with quality information focused specifically at the goals of the visitors seeking that information. It also passively provides means of getting in touch with David, should anyone reach the point where they feel they could use further advice from a professional.

With a dedicated information site, it was much easier to "show our wares" - the main heading and navigation make it very easy to "get" what's on offer. I might recommend making more of the fact that the information is **free**.

How giving away your knowledge can be good business

It seems a paradox, but lots of people who provide services professionally (including David Crankshaw and my own design agency Scratchmedia), are discovering that giving away your trade secrets is actually good for business!

I've published everything I know about web design on my site Web Design from Scratch, and David does the same with the Search Marketing Handbook. The initial reaction is often "Aren't you cannibalising your own business?", which is completely understandable, but in fact it's quite the reverse.

If you think about it, visitors to one of our sites must fall into one of two categories:

People who are actually looking for professional services right now

These people can connect with the information they see on the site, and will naturally trust that the provider knows how to do it, because they're showing how it's done.

The rest – people who don't have a need, or a budget, for professional services right now

They might be just researching, or finding out how to do something for themselves. If these people aren't in the market for services right now, they're not going to buy anyway, so you're not losing anything at this time.

But at some point in the future these same folk may realise they have a need that they don't have the time or skills to do themselves. Guess who'll be at the front of their minds when they do. The expert who taught them those nuggets of knowledge on that site.

Case Study 4: Alternative Energy Store

The Alternative Energy Store has a very strong core philosophy. Its purpose is to promote positive change by helping people make more environmentally friendly choices about their energy needs and lead a lower-impact lifestyle. It achieves this by offering both the knowledge and the tools to do so.

Take a look at the site before the redesign, and see what you can discern about the site's goals from the information on screen.

The only real clues to that on the original website come from a few links: “Educate Yourself” is the most noticeable, being promoted to the first item on the main navigation in an effort to promote the educational goal of the site. However, it's not ideal as a call to action because it doesn't accurately describe what you'll get when you click on it. For all you know, it might be a campaign telling everyone to read more or go back to school.

There are also text links to “Alt-E University” (which risks sounding elitist), “Alt-E Forum” and “Knowledge Base”, but these are very low-priority (through a combination of small size, plain colour, and position on the screen).

The net result is a site that just shouts that it's a store, which the owners acknowledged was not in line with their business goals.

The site comes across as “95% store with some other supporting information”. The visual style is reminiscent of other stores like Amazon.com (with the simple tab bar, and large central area flanked by 2 equal narrower columns).

However, this isn't really representative of the Alternative Energy Store team's goals, which are as much oriented towards providing access to information and supporting people's efforts to manage cleaner living projects.

Original

[Login](#) | [Account Info](#) | [Order Status](#) | [View Cart](#) | [Checkout](#)
Cart: 0 item(s) / \$0.00
account #: GUEST

the Alternative Energy STORE ®
Toll-Free: 877-878-4060
Order online 24 hours a day
Se habla español
Making Renewable Energy Affordable™

[Educate Yourself](#) [Storefront](#) [Marine](#) [RV & Bus](#) [Camping](#) [Solar Heating](#) [Energy Efficiency](#) [Off-Grid Cabins](#) [On Grid](#)

SEARCH: | [Site Map](#) | [Affiliate Program](#) | [About Us](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#)

[Newsletter Sign-Up](#) Monthly Educational Specials [Sign-Up](#) | [Alt-E University](#) | [Alt-E Forum](#) | [Knowledge Base](#)

Product Categories

- ◆ Batteries
- ◆ Charge Controllers
- ◆ Composting
- ◆ D C Voltage Converters
- ◆ Education, Books & Videos
- ◆ Emergency Backup Power
- ◆ Energy Efficient Appliances
- ◆ Fuses,Cables,Switches & Misc. Electrical
- ◆ Hydropower
- ◆ Inverters & Accessories
- ◆ Kits And Package Deals
- ◆ Lighting & Fans
- ◆ Meters & Communications
- ◆ Mounts & Trackers
- ◆ Power Panels
- ◆ Solar Air Heaters
- ◆ Solar Electric Panels
- ◆ Solar Hot Water Systems
- ◆ Solar Pool And Spa Heating
- ◆ Water Pumps
- ◆ Wind Systems

Specials

*** 30% OFF** Reduce your next heating bill by 30% this winter using a *SOLAR AIR HEATING SYSTEM!

Solar Panels, Wind Generators & More...

 Xantrex DR1512 Inverter (1.5kw, 12V) DR Inverter/Charger provides dependable modified sine wave power for businesses,homes and workshops. List Price: \$884.00 Your Price: \$651.95 DETAILS ADD TO CART	 Xantrex SW Plus 2548 Inverter/Charger 2500 Watt, 48 Volt Sine wave inverter, AC charger and integrated dual transfer switch. List Price: \$3,795.65 Your Price: \$1,778.28 DETAILS ADD TO CART	 Environmentally Friendly AA Rechargeable Batteries & Charger Uses non-toxic Nickel Metal Hydride technology. Includes 4 AA rechargeable batteries and AC/car charger. List Price: \$29.95 Your Price: \$25.95 DETAILS ADD TO CART
 Compact Fluorescent 12V, 11W Lamp Bulb Uses 70% less power than regular bulb. Connects directly to 12 volt system. List Price: \$14.00 Your Price: \$13.96 DETAILS ADD TO CART	 Phocos 20 Amp, 12/24V Solar Charge Controller 20 Amp solar charge controller, automatically detects and works with 12 and 24 volt DC systems. List Price: \$72.00 Your Price: \$62.00 DETAILS ADD TO CART	 Danby DPR2262W 7.8 cu ft Propane Gas Refrigerator Refrigerator uses no electricity, powered on propane gas. Great for cabins & remote sites without power. CALL FOR PRICE

Solar & Wind Power Rebates & Tax Credits

Did you know many states offer up to 50%+ rebates on your purchase of a solar energy or wind power system? To learn more about what's available to you, [click here](#).

Customer Testimonials

See what our customers have to say about us. [Click here](#).

Join the Alt-E Team!

We're looking for motivated sales associate candidates who are passionate about renewable energy, committed to delivering superior customer service, and technically oriented. [Click here](#) for more details on our [current open positions](#).

Is Wind Power for You?

Find out if wind power is right for you. [Click here](#).

Learn More...

- ◆ Beginner's Guide to Solar and Wind Energy

On the redesign, I've simplified the navigation by reducing the nine tabs at the top to three major sections: "Store" followed by "Learn" and "Community".

This simple change actually took several days of discussion, considering the connotations and implications on the brand of each possible label. We worked with "Knowledge" for the second tab for a while, which had the benefit of keeping the 3 options as nouns, but the team judged that "Learn" felt more pro-active.

The overall look is much more spacious and clean, which we feel better represents the clean-living brand. Simpler main navigation more accurately reflects the site's brand and goals.

My new logo combines the two main alternative energy sources: sun and wind.

Knowledge and community information also get more prominence on the home page. As "Store" comes first, it still has highest priority, in line with the site's name. But "Learn" and "Community" are now presented as peers to "Store".

The new navigation choices convey the idea that the site has a threefold purpose. It's a resource to make technology accessible to you, it's a place where you can simply learn best practice for free, and you can also share knowledge with other people.

This design is a good example of the minimal "Save the Pixel" approach in action. There are very few "packaging" pixels on the screen that aren't conveying actual content. We've reduced the number of columns from 3 main sections to 2, and used empty space wherever possible to differentiate areas of content.

Redesign



[store](#) [learn](#) [community](#) [Search](#) [My Account](#) [Log in](#)

"Making Renewable Do-able"

The Alternative Energy Store is the premiere retailer of renewable energy goods. We provide not only the expertise and the technical service the Do-It-Yourselfer needs but also a place for learning & sharing with others who have the same passion. *We Make Renewable Do-able.*

Call us to find out how - 877-878-4060

news

October Renewable Rewards Winner!
Congratulations to [Nancy Fullard](#) on being our October 2007 Renewable Rewards Monthly Drawing winner!

[Alternative Energy Store Ranks on Internet Retailer's Top 500](#)

Alternative Energy Store achieves national award in Internet Retailer Magazine for being one of the top 500 web retailers the United States.

Alternative Energy Store Named on the 2006 Inc. 500 List

Alternative Energy Store was named one of America's fastest growing companies by Inc. magazine...

Alt-E on CNN

Check out one of the Alt-E founders on CNNfn. ([rm](#) | [mov](#) | [wmv](#))

[more >](#)

Featured article

Quick Start: Wind Turbines

Wind turbine systems for homes are one of the more cost effective forms of generating electricity from a renewable energy source if you have the right site. Check out this 5 minute introduction to wind turbines.

Join the community

Share knowledge and experiences with others in the Alternative Energy [forums](#) and [customer ..](#)

Featured Products [more »](#)

Our store has the widest selections of alternative energy products at the best prices.

 <p>Sun-Mar Excel Non-Electric White Compost Toilet</p> <p>List Price: \$1,397.50 Your Price: \$1,323.00</p>	 <p>Kyocera 1.2W 12V Mini Solar Panel Great small panel for science projects, maintaining battery charge, and more!</p> <p>List Price: \$43.13 Your Price: \$28.84</p>
 <p>Fronius Ig5100 5100W Grid-Tie Inverter Open Box Never used, just returned to stock. What a price!</p> <p>List Price: \$3,665.90 Your Price: \$3,116.00</p>	 <p>Global Solar 12W 12V Glass Framed Module NEW! Featuring CIGS Technology!</p> <p>List Price: \$104.00 Your Price: \$83.36</p>

Products by Category

- [Backup Power](#)
- [Batteries](#)
- [Books, Workshops & Videos](#)
- [Cables & Wiring](#)
- [Charge Controllers](#)
- [Composting](#)
- [DC Voltage Converters](#)
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- [Hydropower](#)
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- [Power Panels](#)
- [Solar Air Heating](#)
- [Solar Hot Water](#)
- [Solar Panels](#)
- [Solar Pool Heaters and Solar Spa Heaters](#)
- [Solar Trackers & Solar Panel Mounts](#)
- [Solar Water Pumps](#)
- [Wind Systems](#)

Guides to alternative energy Solutions

Our guides will help you understand the technology and plan your projects

Energy Efficiency	Wind Turbines
Electricity Basics	Solar Water Pumping
Solar & Wind Basics	Micro Hydro Power

3 Make a site for its Visitors

*"If you chase two rabbits,
you will not catch either one."*

Russian Proverb

If you're only reading one thing in this book, I'm glad it's this bit. Here's the number one, most important thing to know and remember when you're making a web site. And it's also one of the most common things that sites get wrong. It is... Make a site for its visitors

Sounds really simple, but it's one of those fiendishly simple things we forget so often (like paying bills on time, or picking the kid up from school). Let's peel back some layers and look at what it means.

What it means is, first you must understand

- who's **really** going to visit your web site, then think
- what's necessary to get your message to those people and help them to **take the next step**

Who's *really* going to use your web site?

This first, vital step just requires plain honesty. Acknowledge who your real market is. Who are the people who will realistically go all the way through your sales process, and actually pay the bills?

Let's take a realistic example and say you're a self-employed web designer (to make things easy). Who's your target market? Is it, er... BMW? Is it IBM? Sony? Chances are, if you're a one-person shop, it's none of these guys. The people who are really going to pay your bills are not big blue-chips. It's businesses near you, other small firms.

So far, so good. Seems obvious, but have you seen how many web designers' own sites seem to be pitching for business they couldn't handle if they won it? You see things like, "Speak to our team" (when it's clearly just one guy sitting in his bedroom), or "We do projects of any size, ranging from pennies to gazillions of dollars".

In reality, this never happens. Anyone who says they do work right across the price range actually invariably works exclusively at the low end of the quoted range. The rest is wishful thinking, but the reality is that it's better to focus on the market you can serve best.

This over-inflation is a great example of skipping step one: not understanding **who's *really* going to use your web site.**

What if Sony or IBM did happen to get suckered, because they were in-between web agencies one day, hadn't had their cup of coffee that morning, and decided to call? How far do you think they'd get, before they realised the small-time web designer couldn't offer the security they needed? One minute, maybe two... If they'll never buy, don't address them.

Trying to speak to the wrong market is a wasted opportunity to communicate more effectively with your real target audience. Save the pixels for these guys and use the limited attention to the best effect.

So step one is to know who your **real visitors** are, so that you can design a site **for them**.

The **reason** why you need to focus your design on the right audience is that you can't design for everyone. We're all surrounded by so many brands and bombarded by so many messages every day, so for something to catch our attention, it has to be really strong, memorable, eye-catching. It has to get in your face and in your head with a bagful of personality.

An effective brand in the 21st Century has to feel real and tangible, has to be something you can connect with. Your brand has to choose to **be something**, or it will just melt into the rest of the noise. And to **be something to someone**, it has to know who it's talking to.

Taking our example, if you're a small web design shop, then let's suppose your wages will be paid by small or medium-sized local firms, and what do those kind of guys want?

Once we know that, we can plan how to get your message across and get them to the next step (which is what the rest of this book is all about).

Your Visitors are your Friends

Some doom and gloom merchants will tell you, "You know, your competition is just one click away." Ignore these people, that mentality doesn't help! The good news is actually that people are likely to persevere on a web site, as long as **they have reason to believe they're likely to get what they want**.

This is all part of the site's **brand**, which is your promise to your visitors about what they'll find or be able to do on the site, the organisation behind the site, and how it will relate to them. Brand infuses a site with a proposition, which should be embodied on every page and in every feature.

If you've got a visitor onto a web site, you're already over the first hurdle. Something has worked, you just need to capitalise on it.

It's really helpful to remember: **People don't come to your website unless they want your website to be the right one**. People aren't there to criticize your site (and, hey, if they are, they're not your target market, so forget them). It's a great mental release to skip the worrying and doubt, and proceed as though everyone on your site is a warm prospect who's willing your site to be what they're looking for.

The web designer's job is really to deliver two simple things:

1. to create the belief that "**I'm in the right place**" on the very first page, then
2. to preserve the "scent" that keeps the visitor pushing on to their goal

Affirming Positives

Assuming we're talking just to our target market, what they're actually doing is **looking for affirming positives**. They want clues that tell them they've found what they're looking for, that they don't have to spend more of their valuable time searching: that they've arrived.

So let them know on page one that they're in the right place. Think, "What does my real live customer want to see?" Step inside your visitor's head. Imagine you are looking for the things you offer.

Going back to the example of the small-scale web firm providing one-on-one services to small local businesses. What do local businesses want? Well, they might want things like:

- I want someone I feel I can trust*
- They shouldn't be too expensive*
- I want someone I can get on the phone when I need help*

These are realistic tick-boxes that your customer may have in their head. These might be all they want to see to convince them that their search is over. So let's get them to that point, as quickly, cleanly and smoothly as possible.

It's also important not to over-extend your ambitions with a web site. It's common to get carried away and think that your marketing site has to close a sale. It's not going to, that's the site owner's job. The web site's job is to get the visitor to the point of taking the next step, whatever that is. The next step depends on the market, but it's very often something like ordering a brochure, or picking up the phone.

All your site needs to do is get someone to that key point. It needs to tick enough of the checkboxes, and then give the visitor enough incentives to keep taking the next step with clear paths and calls to action.

The real trick, of course, comes in figuring out that path to take your visitor on, from first-sight to next-step. Let's look at our first case study.

Case study 5: Sunhome.biz

Sun Home Communities owns and manages seven mobile home and Recreational Vehicle parks in the beautiful US state of Arizona. Let's step inside the head of the typical visitor to this site.

First, we reviewed the facts. This is what Sunhome told us about its existing customer base:

- **The majority are older people over retirement age**
- **They can spend up to six months of the year at the resort**
- **They're looking for somewhere that's guaranteed to be warm, knowing there will be people around them and activities to do, but not too busy**

Armed with these facts, we next imagined some scenarios, picturing a typical visitor to the web site, and reading her thoughts to see what questions might be looking for tick boxes:

- I want a place to spend the winter months in the warm. Is this the right site?*
- Is this for me? Can I see myself enjoying spending 6 months here?*
- Does it fit my expectations and budget?*

If we can provide enough evidence to our visitor to tick these 3 boxes, we've got a great chance of getting their phone call. There may be nothing else needed to increase Sunhome's business.

Original

sun home communities [home](#) | [locate parks](#) | [buy your home](#) | [tour the parks](#) | [reservations](#)
[ambassador downs](#) | [apache gardens](#) | [cactus gardens](#) | [cherokee village](#) | [park place](#) | [sundowner](#) | [wickiup](#)

HAVE FUN IN THE SUN THIS WINTER!



FOR COMPLETE HOME INVENTORY ONLINE

[CLICK HERE](#)

Affordable Homes!



OUR RESIDENTS SWIMMING OUTSIDE IN FEBRUARY

Starting From \$1,000



Sundowner Winter Holiday Party 2004



[Tour Our Parks In Pictures](#)

Sun Home Communities owns and manages 10 mobile home and RV Resort communities throughout the beautiful state of Arizona. We have an assortment of living options for active adults and families.

Scheduled Activities
Aerobics, Bingo, Water Exercise, Church, Potlucks and Much More!!!

Events and Parties
Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years, Banquets, and Live Music Concerts

Look at Sunhome's original site design, and consider the initial messages our visitor will perceive.

The questions I always ask when reviewing a web page for the first time are:

- **What do you notice first?**
- **What message do you get?**
- **What clues can you find that point to possible goals?**

The most obvious element on the page is the “Have fun in the sun this winter” message, which is a good start at a strap line, but its positioning is wrong.

Because it's contained in a box, which is one of several similar containers on the page, it only logically applies within that box, and doesn't relate to the whole site as a strap line should. Its positioning and style make it look more like an advertisement than natural content.

The page lacks a clear identity to tell you *where you are*. The top navigation bar, which should contain important clues, looks like a toolbar. (Also, white text on blue is not easy to read, particularly if you have weak vision, which we should assume is the case for our the target user.)

Looking further for clues, there is a great piece of concise introductory text “Sun Home Communities owns and manages...” This also needs to be positioned higher up the page, to give it more prominence and be viewed earlier.

Let's consider the 3 main checkbox questions, and see how far the home page goes in answering them.

“I want a warm place to spend the winter months. Will I find that here?”

The company's name, Sunhome, does evoke the promise of sunshine. However, the original design doesn't go far enough to reinforce that sense. If sunshine is core to the brand, everything in the design should reflect or support that. There's only a small image of a sun, top left, and the name Sunhome only appears in tiny text on the very top navigation bar.

The strap line “Have fun in the sun this winter!” is accurate, but it's incomplete. It could be calling the visitor to have fun in the sun in the Bahamas, Budapest, or Bahrain. Also, I would imagine that the target audience are less interested in “fun” than a broader, more relaxed enjoyment.

On the redesign, the image of the sun merges with the name to create a large bright logo, which is the first thing you see on the page. “I'm looking for sun... Ah, yes, I've come to the right place”.

See my redesign (opposite).

How does it better communicate that you'll find warm winter sun at Sunhome?

The range of parks is simply displayed in the prominent box on the top right of the redesigned page. The adjacent words “Senior” or “Family” provide useful information that tells the first-time visitor what's on offer, i.e. community – parks – mainly senior – some family – Arizona – sun.

Redesign

Sunhome communities

Contact us | Site map

Tour the parks | Buy a home | Reservations

Relax all year round in beautiful Arizona sunshine

Sun Home Communities owns and manages 10 mobile home and RV Resort communities throughout the beautiful state of Arizona.

We have a range of **living options** to suit active seniors and families.

At Sunhome parks there are always **events, activities and sports** to suit everyone.

Every community has great access to **shopping, theatres, restaurants and healthcare**.

Please tour our parks to find the unique characteristics each one has to offer. We're sure that you'll find a warm welcome.

Contact us for more information, or to make your reservation!

Our parks

Ambassdor Downs	Senior
◀ Cherokee Village	Senior
Park Place	Senior
Sundowner	Senior
Wickiup	Senior
Apache Gardens	Family
Cactus Gardens	Family

Map & directions »

Current rental listings »

Homes to buy »

Home | Tour the parks | Buy a home | Reservations

The page background and new logo create the feeling of **hot, hazy, sunny days**.

A large, **bold, meaningful heading** gives the page a focal point and indicates the start of the main content.

Arranging photos in a more free-form Polaroid-like style supports a **holiday feeling**, evoking the sense of sharing memories.

“Is this for me? Can I see myself enjoying spending 6 months here?”

We reinforce the feeling of ‘rightness’ with the next thing you see: the prominent strap line: “Relax all year round in beautiful Arizona sunshine”. The word ‘sun’ has been refined to ‘sunshine’. (The word ‘sun’ by itself can have many connotations. It could be associated with sunburn or drought. ‘Sunshine’ evokes the sense of leisure more specifically, which serves our purpose better.)

As Sunhome’s customers are looking to spend as long as six months or more there, including the words ‘all year round’ reassures visitors that they can rely on the sunshine and company.

Specifying the location as ‘Arizona’ adds more important information up-front. This is an essential piece of information, which can help qualify whether Sunhome is something the visitor would consider looking into further (is this right for me?).

“Does it fit my expectations and budget?”

“We have a range of living options to suit active seniors and families.” says that yes, it is inclusive and does apply to you, so read on...

In fact, all the text on the live site home page just creates possibilities in very few words, which does nothing to risk putting anyone off, but may tick boxes.

While prices aren’t displayed on the home page, they’re all just one click away. “Living options” takes you straight to homes for sale, and clicking on any of the individual parks gives you prices at the top of the page.

You don't want to give someone any reasons to make a *negative* choice until you've given them the chance to get excited that this *may* be the site for them. So unless you compete specifically on price, perhaps consider leaving price to the later stages of a conversation (like in a real-world sales situation).

A Note on Accessibility

On the redesign I aimed to make everything big, bold, and high-contrast. The headings and body text are bigger. I also made the main navigation bar large and obvious with bigger, easier-to-read text. While this increases readability for people with impaired vision, another effect of larger text is that it makes clickable links larger (easier to target with a mouse, even with a shaky hand).

4 Spread the Smell of Success

“Dreams, goals, ambitions - these are the stuff man uses for fuel.”

L. Ron Hubbard

Web sites are symbiotic. They live by helping their visitors to achieve their goals, and work best when you have a “win-win” situation.

The logic is simple. If people find it easier to do their stuff on your site, they'll use it more, and tell their friends, and the search engines will rate it more highly, which brings more people... which means success.

How do you make that happen? You need visitors' compliance, one way or another, whether you're selling something, earning revenue from ads, spreading a message, or providing information for the common good. It all involves visitors (people) and the more people the better. The more they do what you want them to do, the better too.

The trick to figuring out how to get people to do what you want them to do is to **let them do what they want to do at the same time**, so that they don't notice they're achieving some other goal. (It's like using treats to train a dog or making “tidying up” a game with kids.)

Why goals? The approach I use is based on goal-oriented design: a discipline built around the premise that it's our goals that drive our behaviour. Goal-oriented design has been applied to the design of just about everything over the past few years, with great success. The process was first documented by Alan Cooper of Cooper Interaction Design, who introduced it in his book “The Inmates are Running the Asylum” (probably the book that has most influenced the way I think about design).

All Web Sites have Goals

All web sites have goals: selling stuff, raising awareness, gathering data for marketing purposes, building a brand etc. It's tempting to charge head-on at these goals, putting your visitor's goals in second place. This is generally a mistake.

The signature of a successful web site is a step-by-step path that leads each visitor from first view, through to their desired end result. At each step in this process, you should be sure that your site:

- Retains your visitor's trust *and*
- Keeps the "scent" of the visitor's goal
- Without losing sight of its own goals

In order to know how to carry your visitors forwards through your site with confidence, you need to understand their goal. What do they want? What are they trying to achieve?

The ideal way to start answering this question is to have access to qualitative data on the real people who you intend to use your product/web site. Even if you don't, a bit of common sense and imagination can go a long way. Just visualising **any realistic person** really interacting with your site is far more powerful than working with a generic "people" or "users" in mind.

A brief introduction to Personas

Alan Cooper introduced the concept of personas in his goal-oriented approach. Personas are essentially fictional characters who embody typical characteristics of a target group (in our case, web site visitors).

You create personas early in the design process, based on all the information you can discover on your real user base: their environment, socio-economic & personal factors, and even give them names and photographs. Most importantly, you give them realistic goals based on real insights into their conditions and needs. Then, as you design, you make your decisions specifically to enable these actual personas to reach their personal goals successfully.

They work by giving you a focused way of getting under the skin of real-world visitors.

Playing the roles of personas in scenarios and imagining how your personas will respond and make choices, you can make design decisions with more confidence and create a consistent user experience.

Personas are a great tool to give you insight into what your actual target visitors really need, and what will drive them through your site.

The best place to learn more about this excellent process is probably Alan's book "About Face".

Retain your visitor's trust

There's no point trying to get someone to sign up to your newsletter, hand over their personal information, or part with hard-earned cash the moment they land on your web site, (yet lots of sites make this mistake). Imagine walking into a car showroom, and the salesperson walking over and asking for money, before you've decided what you want. Or being asked to fill in a form with all your personal details in order to look at pictures in an art gallery. Crazy, but it's very common on the web.

Marketing people call the point where your campaign tries to get the customer to hand something over a "call to action", and timing your call to action is as critical to success on a web site as it is in a real-world sales situation.

Going for the money shot at the wrong time is actually counter-productive, because it risks blowing your visitor's trust. The web is a pretty low-trust environment already, so it's better to err on the side of caution and make sure you retain the visitor's trust.

Assume that your visitor's confidence is fragile, and once lost impossible to rebuild, and you won't go far wrong.

Keep the “scent” of goals

A few years ago, people used to preach the 3-Clicks Rule: the idea was that "everything on your web site should be accessible within 3 clicks from the home page". We now know this to be false. Tests have proved that we're actually quite likely to persevere and push through to reach what we're after, as long as **we're confident that we can achieve what we want**.

Like a hound following a trail, your visitor needs to catch the **scent** of their target and keep that scent until they get there.

Knowing this gives you some leeway as a site designer to control when and how the site's goals are met. The trick is to go for a win-win solution, where your site achieves what it needs in the process of leading its visitors to their goals.

Win-win solutions

Take these examples of win-wins:

- Download.com** lets me access a huge range of free or free-to-try software, and provides useful tools to help me evaluate the best software for my needs. It earns its revenue by displaying advertisements, but not everywhere! As I'm waiting for my download to begin, I'm presented with targeted advertisements for alternative or related products, which may also suit my needs. I have no objection, as download.com has already led me smoothly to my goal.
- PayPal** wants to keep its members' personal information up to date. Every now and again, as I log in, it asks me to confirm one piece of personal info. It's no trouble for me, I can skip the step if I need to, and I trust that PayPal will take me straight to my account overview on the very next page. The site is achieving its goal of maintaining data quality without giving me any reason to lose confidence.
- Hotmail** rapidly gained millions of users for its (advertising-funded) free email service, by appending a short marketing message to the end of every email message sent through the service. No one minded much, as they were getting something for nothing already.
- Lots of sites provide free content and also offer supplementary free content to visitors who provide their email addresses (for example, by signing up to a newsletter). The key to making this work is to establish trust through providing good content for free, and presenting the opportunity for visitors who would like more of the same to sign up, without pressure.

These are all great examples of win-win solutions, where the web site "holds its horses" until the point where the visitor or user is already well underway with achieving what they came for. They haven't ever lost sight of their own goals, they just pick the right moment.

Hint to help you find your win-win: “Achieve... by...”

It can be really helpful to express your site's goal in terms of your visitors' goals, e.g.:

- We'll increase awareness of our product's awareness **by** letting people easily compare our features and prices with the competition.
- We'll generate 100 qualified sales leads per month **by** making it easier for more people to find information on our services and get in touch with a local sales office.
- We'll increase revenues by 15% **by** providing free articles on pensions, investments and savings for couples approaching retirement age, together with a range of paid online services and e-books.

The rest of the book deals with specific techniques for creating a clean scent trail for your visitors to follow, starting with the most essential principle: the practice of simplicity.

Case Study 6: Buildium.com

Buildium is a software development company based in Massachusetts. They develop a suite of software products specifically pitched at three different markets: landlords, property managers and housing associations.

The features of the product vary for each market. The Property Manager version includes tools to help them deal with a large number of properties, whereas the landlord one is more scaled down.

Original

The original web site home page looked like this. The three narrow columns introduce the three editions of Buildium's solution.

The screenshot shows the original Buildium website homepage. At the top right, there is a promotional banner for a "Free 15-day trial—be up & running today!" with links to sign up for a free trial or read why buildium is right for you. Below this, the Buildium logo is displayed with the tagline "property management solutions". A blue sidebar on the left features the words "simple", "secure", and "reliable". The main content area is divided into three columns. The first column contains a section titled "latest news" with four recent news items. The second column is for the "landlord edition™", which is described as a total solution for landlords and renters that helps them increase cash flow while saving valuable time. The third column is for the "property manager edition™", which is described as a complete online system that streamlines tasks for property managers. The fourth column is for the "association edition™", which is described as a comprehensive solution built with condos and homeowner associations in mind. At the bottom, there are links for privacy, security, and site map, along with a copyright notice for 2003-2007 Buildium, LLC.

What do you notice first?

The corporate logo stands out strongly (as it is large and has lots of space around it). I find my eye is then drawn to the 3 black and white photographs. Underneath the logo you might notice the strap line saying 'property management solutions'.

The company name and 3 photographs don't yet tell me what the site is for, who it's for, or what I'll find here.

The strap line is good. It says what Buildium does, but it doesn't go as far to say that Buildium provide software solutions. So far, it could be a property management service.

What other clues are there?

The next significant clues you come across are 'simple, secure, reliable'.

That's not a clear heading. Simple, secure reliable what? Property management solutions presumably, but then you need to find the subtle strap line above to confirm that.

Out of the three words, the only really useful one is 'simple'. 'Secure' and 'reliable' shouldn't need stating, they're pre-requisites. So valuable word space has been spent on words that should be taken for granted.

Use words to highlight positive differentiators, rather than to say your product or service isn't something negative.

A good rule of thumb is: don't use a term unless its opposite would also be a positive differentiator. In that way, you can be sure you're using your pixels & messages where they'll have real content value.

'Secure' is the opposite of 'insecure'

'Reliable' is only the opposite of 'unreliable'

Would anyone advertise the fact that their product is insecure or unreliable?

No, they wouldn't. So it isn't necessary to state the opposite.

'Simple' on the other hand differentiates from 'complex'. Complex isn't necessarily negative, just different. Complex can mean it's comprehensive, so there's room in the market for both. One group of users may prefer a simple solution, while others may need a more comprehensively-featured solution.

In this case, I think it's a mistake to present the call to action ("Sign up for your free trial now") on the home page, before the visitor has been told about the benefits. This is also positioned above the site logo, which is awkward.

Calls to action should be placed at any appropriate points, usually immediately following content that describes the benefits, where a visitor may be convinced enough to take the next step (i.e. picking the right moment to hit the site's goals).

Overall, the original Buildium design felt rather cold and bare. I feel like I want to see evidence of the product and what it can do for me from the first page. Screen shots and customer quotes are two things that could help make the product feel more real.

A first-time visitor has to do some reading to figure out if they're in the right place, and then it's difficult to find where to go to find what you need. The routes into the main pages that describe the 3 solutions take the form of small "more" links. In other words, the path to success is very narrow.

So the first task of the redesign was to state more clearly and openly what's on offer to the visitor, trying to hit their mental checkboxes. Then, we needed to provide appealing paths forward, constructing a strong scent that made sure no one stops at the first page.

The most significant early decision was to separate the site into multiple specialised sites. Buildium.com should remain as the corporate message, but the three products are in reality quite different, with mutually exclusive markets. Property managers actually have different requirements from landlords and housing associations, which is why they have distinct solutions.

Each group would benefit from a more targeted message, which could contain checkbox triggers designed for their different goals, and – just as importantly – would **exclude** messages more appropriate for the other markets, thus making the best use of pixels.

Always aim to model your information architecture around the target visitor groups, rather than any internal structure. While your company may be organised into logical divisions, if these are not meaningful to a first-time visitor, don't base your web site flow around it.

In Buildium's case, there's a clear logical structure, with the company as parent of 3 products. But unless visitors are interested in this bigger picture, they are not helped, because the web site would have to communicate more information than is necessary to get any one particular visitor to their goal.

Redesign

 buildium
#1 in online property management

Property Manager Edition

buildium.com | contact us

- ✓ Double-entry accounting
- ✓ Accept & make payments online
- ✓ Track residents, leases & receivables
- ✓ Online accounts for residents
- ✓ Ability to print checks

[Home](#) [Features](#) [Pricing](#) [Testimonials](#) [Start now](#)

No other product gives you such a complete online property management package at such a low price.

Buildium Property Manager Edition has been designed to be the most complete & affordable online property management package. It has all the features you need to manage anything from a few lets to hundreds of apartments, including:



Track **everything** for **all** your properties in your private online management area



Automatically produce complete **double-entry accounts**



No more bank queues! Take **rent payments** and pay all your **expenses** online



Print checks for all your suppliers with **one click**



Give your residents **easy online access** to their history, service requests etc.

In this section

- [Second-level page](#)
- [Try visiting here](#)
- [Here's another page with a longer title](#)
- [Our Recommendations](#)
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 For us, being able to pay bills online with Buildium is worth the price on its own!

R. BUFFON, PA

Free Trial



Try Buildium Property Manager free for 15 days, and see what it can do for you.

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What do you notice first in the redesign?

The page identity is now “Property Manager Edition”, with the company brand playing a supporting role. This is good, as it helps someone who is a property manager believe she's in the right place.

The main page heading probably stands out next, being large and bright red. It contains several words specifically designed to tick off the mental checkboxes: “complete”, “online property management”, “package”, “low price”. Taken together, these words encapsulate the whole offering.

Other clues

The primary navigation is large and bold, designed to make it easy to find a next step.

If you scan further down the page, the 5x central panels highlight specific benefits for the target property manager visitor, and a bright, bold “15 day free trial” graphic gives an appealing call to action.

It's much easier to design a site for a well-defined target user, than it is to try to serve all possible visitors. Chasing one rabbit at a time will mean you catch more.

5 The Simple shall inherit the World Wide Web

*"In any thing at all, perfection is finally attained
not when there is no longer anything to add,
but when there is no longer anything to take away..."*

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

At this point, I'm assuming you know your purpose in creating a web site, you have insight into your target visitors and what drives them, and the importance of creating a clear scent path to lead them to their goals, (which is the way to achieve your project's goals).

Before going into specific techniques, I want to focus again on the core practice of simplicity.

Simple solutions are better – by definition. Occam's Razor teaches us that given any 2 solutions (in design terms, two visual designs that communicate the same content), the one that achieves it **more simply** will be more successful.

The logical argument is:

- **The more stuff there is on a web page (the more different areas there are, the more diverse signs, words and options)...**
- **The more things the visitor will need to view in order to find the path to what they want...**
- **The chance of their finding the sign they need before giving up can only be lower with more noise, and the amount of work can only increase**

The Simple numbers game

Simple is best. It's always a good idea to look for the simple core within a complex situation. The dedication to simplicity is core to the “Save the Pixel” approach.

Unnecessary complexity brings risk and cost disproportionate to its benefits. You should aim to have only as much of anything as is necessary to get the job done. How much “X” should you have in your web site? “Enough, and no more!”

Put another way, your web pages should be no more complex than they need to be to fulfil their various objectives.

Simplicity benefits the web professional in numerous ways:

1. Simpler designs are quicker to create, requiring fewer pixels and strokes of the mouse. Making something twice as complex as it needs to be doesn't usually mean it takes twice as long to make. In the long run, I reckon it will take **four times** as much work.
2. They're also quicker and easier to produce/slice into templates. (It takes a tiny fraction of the time to build a box with square edges, compared to a box with 4 rounded corners.)
3. It's easier to debug, make valid, edit and re-engineer etc.
4. Simple pages make smaller files, with fewer assets, which download quicker and are more likely to look right on a variety of browsers. All this improves people's experience.

Simplicity is good for business. Successful web sites are consciously playing a percentage game. You want to retain visitors from their entry page right through to the goal being reached. If this is selling shoes, the more people you retain at each step in the process, the more shoes you sell. Simple messages often come across more successfully (because of the way we consume web pages, scanning for clues rather than reading).

When to be different

Most design problems have been faced and solved before. The better solutions have been used again and again, and have become **conventions**, which persist until a better solution still comes along to displace it.

Sure, there are always new contexts and new issues, which require original solutions, but in any project the majority of the challenges are not original.

There is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has already been, in the ages before us.

Ecclesiastes

When faced with any problem, the designer has two ways they can go.

- One is to address the problem as a new challenge, and attempt to solve it from first principles. This is usually challenging and fun, and it's also time-consuming and risky.
- The second way is to re-use previous solutions to similar problems - "standing on the shoulders of giants". In design, this second approach means using **design conventions** (patterns for layout, navigation, style etc., that have worked successfully before).

Conventions are our friends

There are thousands of common design patterns that have become conventions, **for good reason**. Familiar, conventional solutions make life easier for you, the designer, and also for the people who visit your sites, because it takes less thought to implement and understand something that looks and feels familiar and behaves just how you expect.

A minority of web designers seem to believe that it's their job to make everything different and unconventional. While this is very occasionally true, it's more commonly the designer following their own agenda (perhaps based on the belief that feedback from other designers is the most important success criterion). Perhaps sometimes that's also valid, but not in the case of most commercial design projects. It's rarely in a **site's** best interests to be unconventional.

To approach every challenge from naivety, trying to come up with a novel design solution is frankly a crazy waste of energy. Brand new design solutions not only take more work, time, and creative energy, but they also have less chance of success. (It's a natural law that a significant proportion of new things fail: new products, new life forms, new design widgets etc.)

Sure, we often need to create new things as designers. But how do you decide where to direct your precious creative energy, and when is it best to pull out an existing convention?

My answer would be: **use a convention wherever it clearly works satisfactorily.**

Always look for an existing convention first, especially when the problem itself is conventional. If you can't find a conventional solution that works in the context of this project, only then invest in full-on original creative thinking.

Conventional problems include things like:

- Overall page layouts. You can easily recognise certain genres of web site by the layout employed. This is usually a good thing – it means visitors can start interacting with content with minimal thought to establish whether they're in the right place.
- Navigation patterns. Tabs, nav bars, drop-down menus, and inline links are all tried and tested solutions that need no explanation.
- Form layouts. There are ways to arrange form inputs, labels, and buttons that are obvious, use space efficiently, and are accessible to everyone regardless of disability.

Always consider whether there's an **obvious** way to achieve what you need. If you find yourself doubting the obvious convention, try looking at the alternatives from the site visitor's point of view. What's more likely to help them get what they want out of the site?

You don't need to be Clever to be Brilliant

It's tempting to try and make your website stand out by showing how smart you or your audience are. This is invariably a mistake.

Think of the most successful advertisements you can recall. Are they simple or clever?

They might be fun and entertaining, or they might not be.

They might be very obvious, or they might be abstract, word-based or image-based. But the ones that stick in my mind have a simple concept or message at their core.

Lots of people enjoy intellectual stimulation, but there are better places to go for that kind of thing, like picking up a sudoku. Why are people visiting your site? Unless you're running a technical or political publication, where your goals may depend on intellectual stimulation, don't try to make your visitors think, they won't stick around to thank you.

Cleverness introduces risk. Don't use in-jokes that rely on specific prior knowledge. Question marks over your visitors' heads are a sign of mental friction, which is a sign that you'll be leaking eyeballs.

One of the risks of challenging your visitor's intellect is that you'll make them feel stupid, and you don't want to do that! Even if you don't make them feel stupid, your page will still take more work to get through, and you don't want that either! Because attention is limited and the clock is ticking. The easier you make it to pick up the scent, the more people you'll keep.

Being "clever" doesn't make you look smarter. In the case of service providers, it can actually make you seem **less** accessible and less useful.

If you have a message/values/benefits to communicate, just do it! State it, make it plain, bold and unambiguous. When someone gets to your site, they want to know if it's worth persevering with the site. Are they likely to get the information or service they want? So make your site transparent. "This is who we are, this is what we do, who we do it for, and how."

Be smart, not clever

Keeping it simple is hard. One reason it's hard is because we so often feel compelled to be doing something "more", to be different in order to keep the visitor interested. That's how cleverness creeps in. When you're creating your web site this little voice can start telling you that it's too boring, too much like the next site. You feel a desperate need to come up with something with a bit more jazz.

Always keep in mind that the people who'll be coming to this web site to find what they want aren't web designers. They don't get a kick out of looking at new and interesting web designs. They're looking **through** the design, scanning for meaningful clues in the content. The purpose of your design is not to draw attention to itself. It's to **facilitate communication**

When that little voice starts, cover your ears and concentrate hard on your visitors' goals. What do they need from you?

Consider your choices using a pure "Save the Pixel" framework. Any pixels you use to make your visitors think you're clever are pixels you're not using to guide them directly to what they want.

Apply Occam's Razor. Is there a simpler way to achieve the same thing? If so, use it. The simpler solution is better.

Why should you avoid questions like this?

A **rhetorical question** is a linguistic device in which you make a point using the form of a question that doesn't actually require an answer, often proceeding to answer it yourself. This is clearly not the simplest way to communicate a point.

Questions like, “Why use Cleverdick Consulting?” often make me think,
“I don’t know, and I don’t care! Seeya!”

Rhetorical questions are generally unhelpful because they create question marks in your visitor's head, a sign of friction. Any question creates a void, which the visitor is expected to fill, and that means your site loses control of the dialogue.

You wouldn't expect to walk into a car showroom and the salesperson come up to you and ask, “Why would you choose to shop here?”, would you?

Hint: If you have a rhetorical question, try simply turning it into a statement, maybe just by removing the question mark. “Why use Cleverdick Consulting” is much stronger when put as a statement than as a question.

Case study 7: Hexagon Training

Hexagon Training provides training and consultancy to senior management teams all over the world. Clients hire Hexagon to implement leadership development programmes, change management initiatives, executive coaching and team building events. The firm also delivers seminars and keynote speeches on these subjects.

Hexagon is run by some very smart people. Spending time with them, it's great to hear how they create amazing programmes for prestigious clients, who are invariably delighted with the results.

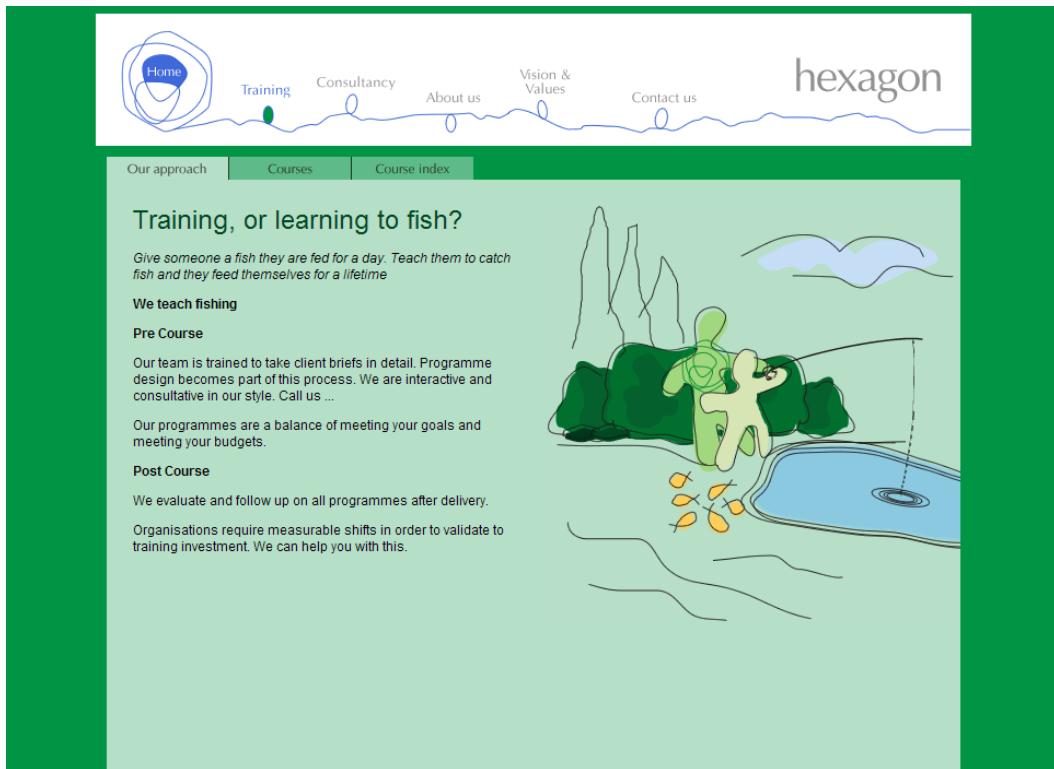
Our goal for the redesign of their site was to enable **more** potential new clients to discover as quickly as possible how Hexagon can help them achieve similar results.

Original

Take the following scenario:

Barbara Beaumont is a busy executive within a large blue chip company. She is responsible for the training needs of the global management team. She has a reputation for an efficient, no-nonsense approach. She controls a sizeable budget.

Barbara's team have put forward a number of suggested training providers. One of them is Hexagon. She's been sent a link to Hexagon's training page. She clicks on the link. What does she notice first?



The logo is in the wrong place, at the top-right of the screen. The “home” link looks more like the site identity. Little question marks appear...

The intense background colour gives the site a heavy feel. The colour changes from page to page for no apparent reason, creating more little ???s

The abstract hand-drawn people shapes reminded us more of mental health issues than positive development.

What do you notice first?

If Barbara clicks on the link to the original site, her eye is likely *first* to land on the most **attractive** visual element – the drawing of abstract characters fishing.

The big white area with text, squiggles and the logo is obviously the navigation bar, but it's not easy to scan as the items are not aligned, so I'd *then* expect Barbara to proceed to scan the text on the page, starting with the headline ‘Training, or learning to fish?’.

She may or may not stop to read the sentence below in italics, which is the famous saying about teaching someone to fish to feed themselves for a lifetime. This is followed by a sub-header “We teach fishing”, which may lead Barbara to think that Hexagon teach fishing (which they don't).

Barbara has to make a quick decision. She has a lot of potential providers to get through. Will she instantly get the metaphor? Will she appreciate it? How can we be sure?

If Barbara visited the site based on a trusted recommendation, she'd already know that Hexagon provides training, and she'd be checking the site to see if it fit her needs. If she came to it cold, the first thing she'd want to know is: **can they fulfil her immediate need?**

Introducing a clever metaphor interrupts Barbara's path to the answer to that question, and also introduces a big risk that she simply doesn't “get it”, and loses faith at that point.

Redesign

On the redesign, we replaced the fishing metaphor with a literal explanation of **what you get with Hexagon**: “Creative training that gets results”.

The screenshot shows the Hexagon website homepage. At the top, there is a green hexagonal logo with a stylized fish inside. To its right, the word "hexagon" is written in a lowercase sans-serif font. Below the logo, a faint watermark-like image of a fish is visible. The navigation menu includes "Training" (underlined), "Resources", "About Us", and "Contact". A large, bold headline reads "Creative training that gets results." Below it, a sub-headline says "For individuals... for teams... for businesses...". A section titled "Unique Training Courses" features a heading "Coaching" and three sub-options: "Coaching Skills", "1:1 Coaching", and "Specific Coaching Interventions". An "Origami crane" graphic is positioned next to this section. Below the crane, there is a "Book Now" button. A text block explains that Hexagon provides training for organisations to develop their own quality in-house coaches. It describes a three-module coaching programme. A "Module 1 - The way of the coach" section discusses the "you the coach" model and its focus on experiences, values, strengths, and weaknesses. A "Topics Covered" list includes "Definition of coaching". To the right, there is a search bar with the placeholder "team building" and a magnifying glass icon. A "Category" section lists options like "Off the Shelf Programmes", "Teams", "Organisations", "Leadership", "Certified Courses", and "All", each with a corresponding checkbox. A "Search" button is located at the bottom right of the search form.

We also removed the abstract cut-out images of people in the name of simplicity. While the shapes could be identified as people, they were not human enough to be engaging, or positively convey a message with any accuracy. We replaced them with more fitting images, like the origami bird.

Origami sculpture connotes skill and creativity, combined with a material you'll find in the workplace

We've retained the essence of the free-thinking scribbles in the logo, navigation highlights, and heading background

Each page on the original website has a different coloured background, which begs the question, "What's different with this section?". That question mark in the visitor's mind should be a warning sign that something needs simplifying. On the redesign, everything is clean, white and borderless; as simple as can be in order to focus the attention on the content.

In the remaining 7 chapters, I'll explore specific design techniques that enable you to achieve your site's goals by helping visitors get what they want – simply and efficiently.

Case study 8: VisionProject

VisionProject is a software tool developed by the Swedish company Visionera that facilitates the management of large projects by allowing companies to track issues.

The project is very rich in features, which makes it a challenge to communicate the advantages at a glance.

Introductory sentence is effective, but is less noticeable than it could be, crowded out by the other solid blocks around it.

These 3 solid blocks are not very readable. The 2x equal boxes tend to lead your eye down the middle. The text contrast is not high enough, and the blue-on-blue links at the bottom don't stand out clearly enough.

The page is not well balanced. The top area is too cramped, while the bottom feels empty.

Original

VisionProject
Issue tracking and project collaboration made easy

Home Features Releases Demo Purchase Support Login About

Get your own **Issue tracking and Support Center** solution, hosted or on-site.

ISSUE TRACKING
VisionProject is a web based issue tracking and project collaboration tool designed to make your projects more efficient and profitable.
Learn more Try demo Purchase

SUPPORT CENTER
This is an add-on support center / help desk module for VisionProject so that you can give your customers and end users support 24/7.
Learn more Live view Purchase

View Tour

Free 20-day trial
Try VisionProject for free for 20 days to see if it suits your needs.
Go to free trial...

VISIONPROJECT 3.0 IS RELEASED!!!
The VisionProject team proudly announces the release of VisionProject 3.0. It is loaded with new powerful features, such as issue work log, alerts/escalations and scheduled reports and much more...
More details here...

USED IN OVER 20 COUNTRIES

POWERFUL **EASY TO USE** **AFFORDABLE**

CUSTOMIZABLE **RELIABLE AND SECURE** **SUPERIOR SUPPORT**

Testimonial
"We really love the tool, keep up the great work!" - Neil C. Fennessey, President, Four Mangos, Inc
More testimonials...

NEW RELEASE
VisionProject 3.0 is released!!!
Read more about our releases here.

Case study
Read a case study about how VisionProject is used by one of our customers.
View case study...

A wide variety of organizations currently use VisionProject, such as:

- Software companies
- Software consulting companies
- Web design firms
- Industrial design firms
- Document scanning service companies
- Bicycle manufacturers
- Ventilation duct manufacturers
- Cleaning companies
- Non-Profit Organizations
- Universities
- And more ...

Visionera AB | Infanterigatan 19, 171 59 Stockholm | Phone: +46 (0)771-105000 | Email: info@visionproject.se

What do you notice first?

The diagram is the first thing most people will notice, the focal point of the page. It is made noticeable by:

- Large size
- Being surrounded by lots of white space
- Dynamic shape
- A variety of bright colours

At a glance the diagram suggests some kind of multiple-step business process. I felt that this may make the site seem complex and hard work. Even if what you're promoting is complex, there's no reason not to make it feel more accessible and simple. In fact, the purpose of VisionProject is to make life easier and simpler for people who have to handle complex processes.

In the redesign, we set out to remove much of the complexity from the home page. We wanted to create a simple message that everyone would get easily, to reduce the risk of anyone making a negative decision at the entry point, feeling encouraged to explore further trusting that the rest of the site will be as easily accessible.

The focus of the page is now the single solid blue box, containing the main heading, which aims to make the solution seem accessible, plus a screen shot that reinforces the instant understanding that the site is about computer software. The two highest-profile signs are combining to tell us simply that this is "project management software".

Orange is used as a **counterpoint** colour to the corporate blue, which helps highlight headings to aid scanning, and also adds warmth to the page.

Redesign

VisionProject

Member Login
Forgot Password? | Get Started

Home Features Customers Releases Support Demo Buy Blog About

Manage projects successfully the agile way!

- ▶ Get projects done on time, on target and on budget!
- ▶ Manage all stages in the project lifecycle
- ▶ Track activities/tasks/bugs/requirements with ease!
- ▶ Handle maintenance and support easily 24/7



Features
Have a quick look at some of the features that are available in VisionProject!
[View the feature tour...](#)

Free Trial
Try VisionProject for free for 20 days to see if it suits your needs.
[Start free trial...](#)

Buzz
"We use VisionProject daily and we simply can't live without it!"
Björn Broberg
Product manager ITLine
Lindab AB

What's it for?

VisionProject is a powerful web based software that makes it easy to manage all internal or external projects in your organization efficiently.

Lack of clear communication between team members is one of the main reasons why projects fail. VisionProject improves communication between people and increases your project success rate significantly!

You can use VisionProject in many different ways, such as:

- ⌚ Manage projects and project portfolios
- ⌚ Capture and track requirements/tasks/bugs/issues
- ⌚ Create reports and dashboards

News Blog 

Oct 07 VisionProject 3.1.1 released
VisionProject 3.1.1 has been released! This release includes a few bug fixes as well as two new features.
[Read more...](#)

Sep 13 Ticket system enhancement
You can now use IMAP and POP3 with SSL (IMAPS and POP3S).
[Read more...](#)

Aug 11 New website!
The VisionProject website has been updated.

6 Getability and the Brand

"It pays to be obvious."

Isaac Asimov

When you arrive at a new web page, there is usually one big hairy question at the top of your mind. The question is: “Am I in the right place?”

If we accept that goals drive our behaviour, then when we use a web site we're trying to find the information or function that will let us achieve some kind of goal.

Whenever you arrive on a page, the only real question to answer is whether you're on the path to that goal. If you believe that you are, you'll proceed. If you don't believe that you are, you may retrace your steps, look further, or give up.

Answering the question “Am I in the right place?” normally means understanding the following:

- Where am I? What is this site?
- Where can I go from here?
- What can I do here?

Getability

A page's “getability” simply means how easy it is for everyone to “get” what's going on (i.e. by answering the important questions easily).

When you visit a “getable” web page, you don't have to think consciously “What's all this?”. You just get it. You may find the answers to the questions **explicitly** – through words or pictures that directly confirm what you're looking for – or **implicitly** through an overall effect created by more subtle clues.

You have to provide means to answer the big questions on **every page**, because someone could come in at any point, by following *deep links* from search engines or other sites.

Getability needs to work at every level. Every page, every interface, arrangement of content, and form should be instantly getable).

Primarily, though, your whole site needs to say:

- What it **is**
- What it's **for**
- **Who** it's for

The sum total of these things can be called the **brand**.

Brand

Let's be clear – your brand isn't your logo, name and colour scheme, although these things are all important. It's all those things, and much more. It's the whole experience. A well-branded web site embodies its identity and its message in everything it does.

Brand is...

The sum of everything people perceive when they experience the product, company, web site etc. in any way – directly or indirectly. It's a symphony of their prior opinions, prejudices, and what they've been told about something, which may be reinforced by their own direct personal experience.

A brand is both a **statement** and a **promise**. "This is who we are, and what we'll do for you". It needs to be consistently manifested throughout the whole experience, from the first impression to the last confirmation email.

What should the brand be?

Before you can make a web site really getable, you have to know your brand.

Good branding isn't an afterthought or something added on. It's essential to the experience. There's no avoiding it.

Everything has a brand, it's just that some are unconscious, some are consciously crafted, some are weak and some are strong.

A new web site design or redesign is either an opportunity to create, re-create or develop a brand. Of course, the way your brand manifests online isn't necessarily the same as with offline channels. A brand needs to adapt to each medium. Online mode may be different to TV or face-to-face contact, and telephone support, but they all need to work together to support a consistent total experience.

Everything on your site should embody and reinforce the brand. Getability is how well all the elements of your design work together in **symphony**, to create the first impression, the instant encompassing assumption: "*Right this is a site*".

Following "Save the Pixel", branding should only be as complex as it needs to be. It should provide a few core messages and remove any unnecessary messages or connotations.

Developing a brand

If you're defining a new brand, or if you're not clear on what your brand is, here are some points to consider.

- What's the **value proposition** or unique selling point (USP)? Why should I come here rather than the competitor? What will I get with Brand X?
- What words could you use to describe the brand's **characteristics**?
Quirky, traditional, challenging, safe, dark, light, fun, serious, professional, amateur, interesting, academic, popular, easy, childlike etc.
- What's the **price point**? Is it cheap, expensive, exclusive, good-value, competitive..?

It's good to relate the brand to your target audience's **motivating goals**.

Even if your brand is manifest through every cell of a web site's being, to make the site truly getable, the **first few primary messages must be on target**.

Exactly which elements are the highest-priority on a page is for the designer to decide, but the most significant features should be some of the following:

- Logo & name
- Strap line
- Main page heading
- Colour
- Imagery
- Primary navigation

The initial impression or message you get from the first few things you notice on a page should help resolve the big question, “Am I in the right place?” This is why, when I’m analysing a web design, I always start by asking, “What do I notice first?”

Here's how I'd describe the brands in redesigns so far



Sunhome's brand

- Bright
- Friendly
- Sunny
- Guaranteed sunshine experience at an affordable price



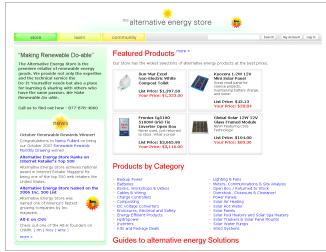
I Hate Clowns brand

- Zany
- Irreverent
- Funny and serious
- A way to express your quirky side



Geonexus' brand

- Authoritative
- Text book
- Businesslike
- Access to professional SEO/SEM expertise



Alternative Energy Store's brand

- Bright
- Positive change
- Feel free to browse
- Easy place to learn & share knowledge about, and buy alternative energy products



Buildium's brand

- Great features
- Great value
- Simple to use
- Does everything a property manager needs



Hexagon's brand

- Elegant
- Smart
- High-quality training for corporates

Case study 9: Moraware

Moraware is a software company that serves a niche market, making software to help people who fabricate worktops / countertops.

What do you notice first on the home page?

The logo is very big and bold, and comes with a very descriptive strapline “Job Management Software for Fabricators”. That's great – it says exactly what's on offer and helps you know if you're in the right place.

The next thing you'll notice is the flat screen showing software. It's not easy to tell what's happening on the screen, but it's comforting to see, and reinforces the getability.

The next item is the main header “Save Time. Get Organized”. This is the only weak link so far, as these aren't differentiating factors. What customer would be looking for software to help him waste time and get more disorganised!?

The rest of the content, from the intro text on the grey panel, the bulleted list of applications of JobTracker to the first main content paragraph, are all really concise and meaningful. There isn't a lot of work to be done on the getability of this home page.

Original

moraware™
Job Management Software for Fabricators

[Home](#)
[JobTracker](#)
[How to Buy](#)
[Online Demo](#)
[What's New](#)
[FAQ](#)
[News and Events](#)
[Customers](#)
[Company](#)

Contact Us

Toll-free:
1-866-312-9273

Sales:
sales@moraware.com

Support:
support@moraware.com

Save Time. Get Organized.

Moraware [JobTracker](#) manages the operations of your growing fabrication shop.

Fabricators across the country use JobTracker for:

- Scheduling
- Estimating
- Purchasing
- Inventory
- Contact Management

JobTracker organizes all your job information, so everyone can access it at the same time. And JobTracker integrates all the steps in your process, which improves communication and reduces errors.

If your shop handles more than 10 jobs per week, you need to check out Moraware [JobTracker](#) to see how much time you could be saving.

Send mail to webmaster@moraware.com with questions or comments about this web site.
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Redesign

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Moraware JobTracker2.0 website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for HOME, JOB TRACKER (which is highlighted in red), ONLINE DEMO, FAQS, and CONTACT US. The main header features the "moraware" logo with a green eye icon and the tagline "software for hard-working people". Below the header, there's a large image of a computer monitor displaying the software interface, followed by the title "JobTracker2.0" in a large, bold, green font. A sub-headline reads "The complete operations solution for countertop fabricators". To the right of the headline is a photograph of a smiling man in a workshop setting, wearing a grey t-shirt and jeans, standing next to a workbench. Below the title, there's a bulleted list of benefits: "Used by hundreds of fabricators worldwide", "Increases productivity", and "Saves money". The page continues with sections about the software's features and a 90-day money-back guarantee.

JobTracker2.0

JobTracker is already helping hundreds of countertop fabricators in the USA and worldwide to save time and reduce costs.

We know software needs to adapt to **the way you work today**, that's why we've designed JobTracker to be easy to use and highly flexible.

JobTracker2.0 can make every step of managing your jobs **quicker, safer and more cost-effective**:

A 3D rendering of the JobTracker2 software box, which is blue and white with the product name prominently displayed.	Scheduling	Plan and optimize your resources easily	✓
	Estimating	Prepare professional quotes in minutes	✓
	Inventory	See all your materials at a glance	✓
	Purchasing	View the materials you need in advance	✓
	Contact Management	See all your customer history in one place	✓

We want you to discover the benefits of JobTracker for yourself.

So we're offering this great offer. Try JobTracker for 90 days, and if you feel it doesn't give you fantastic value, you can return the software and get a full refund. No quibbles - guaranteed!

A green, star-shaped badge with the text "90 DAY MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE" in the center, surrounded by a decorative border.

On our conceptual redesign, we focused on a few areas to increase the level of getability on Moraware's home page.

- We introduced an image of a man in a workshop, showing the context in which the software will typically be used – small-scale hands-on businesses. (The client did have to inform us that this particular image doesn't look like someone who makes countertops – apparently he has the wrong tools.)
- In a similar move to Buildium, we invested effort (and pixels) into giving the product itself a visual identity of its own. In this case, again, "JobTracker2.0" is more prominent than the actual company logo.
- We used a standard trick of the trade when portraying software, which is to render a software-type box. Now, Moraware's product may not be delivered in a box, but the image is useful as a visual clue that this is a real credible product.
- We built on the key application words used on the original site, and associated them with a series of short "checkbox" phrases – even reinforcing each benefit with a tick mark.
- Notice how we emboldened key words in the body copy to highlight to help them stand out to someone scanning the page for reassurance that they may find what they're looking for in JobTracker2.
- Finally, we created a strong and appealing flash to communicate the "90-day money-back guarantee", which is a strong selling point, showing that the company has faith in its product's ability to show its benefits.

7 Layout

*“Set all things in their own peculiar place,
and know that order is the greatest grace.”*

John Dryden (1631 - 1700)

The first goal of layout is great getability

It's easy to scan a page that is well laid-out and understand immediately what you're likely to find, and where to start looking to get what you want.

The way we achieve this is to organise information in a **meaningful** way, in other words, to arrange our content and features on a page so that:

The layout of elements reflects and reinforces the logical relationships between them.

I'll go over a bunch of examples to illustrate this in practice. The basic premise is that the way you arrange things in relation to each other introduces a sense of meaning. When arranging a page, the layout should flow from the meaning already inherent in the content, rather than choosing a page design first and then trying to make the content fit. It's all part of the principle of "designing the content".

Layout conventions

Fortunately, there are heaps of design conventions already around to draw on. Whatever the content you want to show, and the meaning you want to apply, rest assured there's an obvious answer most of the time.

Take a close look at a newspaper, and you'll see dozens of design conventions that are so familiar and obvious you may not be aware they're "design".

Things like showing titles and sub-headings in larger type than body copy, putting the page number at the corner of a page, arranging copy into columns to get more information on the page while ensuring a readable line length – newspapers have been around practising the art of gettable and readable layout for 350 years, and they're a great source for the web designer.

Screen Real Estate

When you land on a web page, you need to know where to start looking for clues to answer the big questions: “Am I in the right place? Where can I find what I want?”

It helps to know which bits of the screen do what job. “Screen real estate” refers to the practice of visually differentiating various areas of your screen according to their purpose (like classifying different areas of land for residential, commercial, industrial use etc.).

The techniques we use to do this are basic. They just involve manipulating the size, shape and position of areas, perhaps combined with colour and tone.

Foreground vs. Background

If your design does not take up the full width of the screen, some of the layout will be content area, while some will be the background to the content. I would aim to differentiate the background by giving it a duller tone than the foreground, possibly also by making the foreground appear on top, by using a subtle drop-shadow.

Fixed vs. Variable

To start with, it's good to differentiate between **fixed & variable** information. In crude terms, variable information is stuff that's different on every page, i.e. content, and fixed stuff is the box the content comes in.

Your **fixed areas** should contain everything that isn't content, including:

- Identity (logo, strap line)
- Global navigation (your main nav, and other secondary global nav in header & footer)
- Status indicators (e.g. “Logged in as...”)
- Global, top-level functions (e.g. Search, Log out, Register)
- Related stuff (e.g. callouts or advertisements that link elsewhere, but aren't strictly page content)

You'll generally have **one variable area** (if you've got a basic one-column or two-column layout). This is where the content goes, the stuff you'd expect to change from page to page.

I definitely recommend making your content area conventional white, unless there's a strong reason not to. Black text on a white background creates maximum contrast, which everyone should be able to read more clearly. Some sites require light text on a dark background, but the convention is dark on light.

Examples



The real estate on the “Search Marketing Handbook” redesign is very clear. The background is quite dark, the top branding area takes the full-width of the content panel, the light-grey thin side column contains navigation, and the main white column is clearly the content.

“I Hate Clowns” is another fixed-width central layout. Here, the branding sits above and outside the main content panel; the background fades into grey, to differentiate the white main content area; the main navigation has a horizontal strip to itself; and the content panel is defined within a black line. In the content panel, the main content is in a wider column, followed by 2 narrower columns of “other stuff”.

JBS Partners' redesign doesn't use physical containers to show all the areas of real estate. The top branding area and navigation bar (both fixed) have different tones, and the main content area is against a sky background. Here, the main column and side column are defined with size and empty space alone, sitting inside an invisible grid. The left edge of the grid is suggested by the alignment of the main identity, the start of the nav, and the content.

How many columns should you have?

Use as many areas of real estate as required, and no more. If you have stuff that should go alongside your content, use two columns. You rarely need more than two columns, unless you have multiple columns of content.

Newspapers get away with multiple columns across a page because the resolution of print is higher, meaning that you can still put a good readable number of characters across a fairly narrow column. On a computer screen, with much lower resolution, you need wider columns to fit an readable line length.

On which side should the secondary column go?

There is no right answer to this perennial question. If you have a vertical navigation list in your secondary column, some argue that keeping it on the left is more conventional, and people will expect it to be there.

However, others argue that the majority of people leave their mouse pointer hanging around the right-hand side of the screen, so it's easier and quicker to target a nav item on the right side of the screen than the left.

I suspect the answer is that, if your page is laid out clearly (you've got your real estate sorted out), it should be instantly getable, so it doesn't matter where you put your second column.

Cascade

Cascade is simply the principle that, because we read pages from top to bottom, the elements at the top of the page are higher-level than the elements below them. "Higher-level" doesn't necessarily mean more **important**, just more **general** – i.e. a higher-level item **describes** or **contains**, or is **about** the items that follow it.

Take some examples:

- The site identity (name, logo, strap line etc.) is **about** the whole site, so nothing should go above it. (Same with newspapers.)

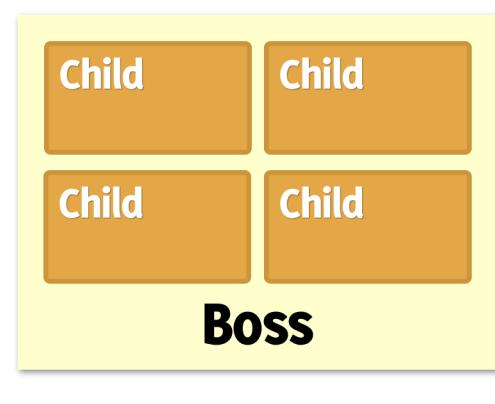
- The main global navigation is higher-level than the page sections, a page **belongs** to one of the sections, and all the sections **belong** in the main nav, so the main nav goes above all the content. Sometimes, it will go to the left of the content, but as long as it is still as high up the page as the top of the content, it will have spatial dominance (because it is nearer the origin – the top-left corner of the page).
- The page title is **about** the rest of the article, so it goes at the top. As you read down the page, you may find level-2 or level-3 headings, which are, in turn, about the bit of text that follows them. But the main heading at the top is about it all.

Lower-level items are not less valuable; rather they tend to be more **specific**.

Ownership and Containment

The best way to explain this concept is through visual examples. Containment is just a way of assigning meaning through the relative positioning of elements. Note that it's preferable to create ownership using space rather than actual visible containers (boxes etc.), because it uses fewer pixels.

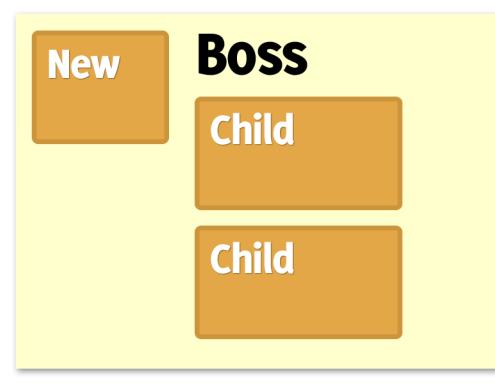
	<p>This is pure containment at work, and should take no decoding at all.</p> <p>In this example, Boss owns all 4 children, through purely spatial properties.</p> <p>Boss is the first element in the box, being at the top left, so you naturally “read” it first.</p> <p>Note that the box is not necessary. Even if the group is defined through space alone, containment still works.</p>
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Here, the distinction is less clear.

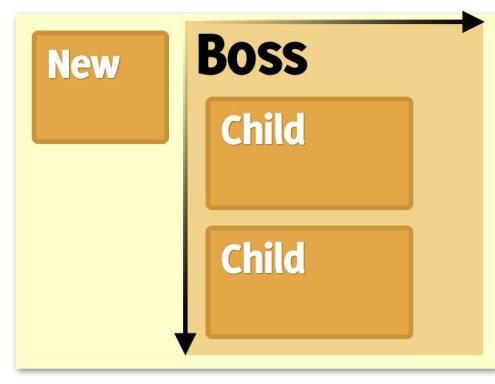
Although **Boss** is graphically dominant, by being the biggest and highest-contrast text, it is not spatially superior.

You would probably still assume that **Boss** owns the other contents of the container, although it takes a bit more decoding.



Now, **Boss** is still the parent of both Children, but what about the **New** element?

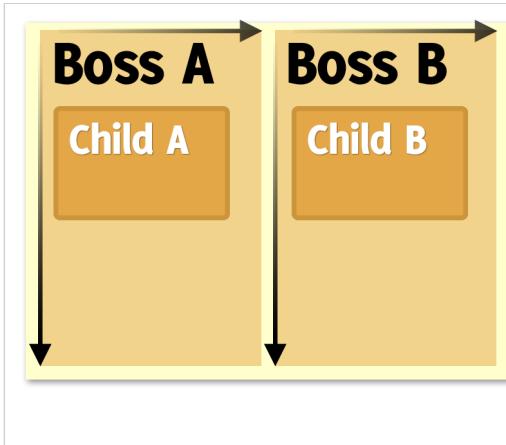
New is graphically less prominent, but it is not dominated spatially by **Boss**, because it is neither below nor to the right of **Boss**.



Imagine an invisible box that extends from the top-left corner of a dominant element as far as it can go to the right and downwards.

Anything that is contained in this imaginary box will seem to be owned by the dominant element.

New is not contained in the box, so does not appear to be owned by **Boss**. Even if we extended the imaginary box to the left as well, it would not contain **New**, as **New** is not lower than **Boss**.



Here, **Boss A** is clearly the parent of **Child A**, and **Boss B** is the parent of **Child B**.

Boss A's box ends when it meets **Boss B**'s box, because **Boss B** is not inferior to **Boss A** (they're on the same level).

These invisible boxes can, of course, be nested. So **Child A** could have children of its own, which would also be children of **Boss A**.

Focal point

Every page should have a clear starting point. This will normally be a strong visual element with high *noticeability*, and will be positioned high up the page.

A focal point shows your visitor where to start looking. If you, the designer, haven't decided first what the focal point of the layout is going to be, you may be making your visitors do more work than is necessary.

I try to position the focal point of each page at the top of the main content area. There are a few reasons why this supports getability:

1. The main heading should describe what's on the page (or site, if it's on the home page), which is one of the main pieces in understanding "Where am I? Am I in the right place?" It's perfectly reasonable for the main heading to be the focal point of a page.
2. One of the other main clues you use to figure out "What's here, and where can I go?" is the top-level navigation. This is invariably positioned near the top of the content, so the eye doesn't have to move far from the focal point to survey the sections of the site.

Should my logo be the focal point?

Generally, no. A logo should be strong and easy to notice when you first arrive, but the object of the focal point should be **different on every page**.

People don't come to web sites to look at the logo, but to find something else. If the focal point of the page doesn't point the way to that "something else", the page is not working optimally.

The logo should be part of the page packaging, i.e. in a *fixed* area. This way, even if it is quite bold and noticeable, it will also have a level of "ignorability", which will mean people can easily spot it once when they arrive, then easily ignore it as they pass through further pages.

Case study 10: IP Newsflash

IP Newsflash is a specialist information resource site run by Rolf Claessen that aggregates all news relating to Intellectual Property (IP). There is a lot of information on the site, the bulk of which is text-based.

Looking at the original design, the layout is formal and relatively clean, but it's hard work to differentiate one area from another, because the same few visual styles are used for all content. The page lacks visual differentiation of real estate.

Original

The screenshot shows the IP Newsflash website. At the top left is a large blue header "IP Newsflash". To its right is a navigation bar with "Login", "Register", and a search bar labeled "Search Google and IP Newsflash". Below the header are several blue navigation bars on the left side, each containing links like "Home", "More News", "More Notices", etc. The main content area has several sections: "Latest News" (with items like "Showalter Named IP Department Chair at Baker Botts Following Mills ..."), "Notices of the Offices" (with items like "EPO: Enlarged Board of Appeal decision G1/05 is available as PDF document (2006-12-29)"), "Featured Book" (with an image of a book titled "Wörterbuch der Patent- und Markenpraxis Deutsch - Englisch / Englisch - Deutsch" by Heinz J. Reich), and "Patent Family Search" (with a search input field "US6184403" and a "Get" button). On the far right, there are ads for "UK Patent Office", "Registered Patent Agent", and "Patent Information".

What do you notice first?

Nothing, really. You see a bunch of blue heading bars, but you have to start reading closely to find out what's what.

The white area on the left is the primary navigation, but it looks identical to the content columns to the right of it, using the same black text in the same bold font against the same white background.

The section headings and search boxes are all styled the same, so you can't tell them apart.

Having more than two columns isn't that good for clarity either, and the two columns of equal width in the middle, as we've seen before, means you don't know what takes priority.

There is a long-standing myth that you shouldn't have to scroll down, but we now know that people are quite comfortable scrolling down pages, provided – of course – you've given them enough reason to believe they'll get what they're looking for.

The easiest way to make the page more getable will be to make the navigation area clearly **navigation**, and give the content more definition by arranging it in a more standard column formation and using clearer heading styles.

What I did in the Redesign

- I added a strap line to give new visitors an instant and direct description of what the site's about.
- I also added colour-coding to the main navigation, in order to differentiate the sections and tools
- Native page content sits now straight on the white background. Everything in boxes is content "visiting from elsewhere".
- I've kept blue as the main colour for content headings, while increasing the text size to facilitate scanning , and also applied subtle background images to add richness and to increase appeal.
- The heading block for each section uses the same colour scheme as the side navigation, a simple visual association that helps to order the sheer amount of data on-screen. So the "Patent Family Search" has a green header to show it's a tool, while the other content has blue headers.
- Simpler 2-column main layout can also break into 3 columns to accommodate ads (bottom half of page), but main content column is always widest, signifying "start looking here".

Redesign

IP Newsflash ...all your Intellectual Property information in one place

Log in Register Google Search

Home
News
Notices
Caselaw
Books
Feeds
Customize
Mobile
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Case study 11: Nosuni

Nosuni is a Spanish-language-focused social networking site for university students and alumni.

The original site design has a pleasant, clean style, but look closer at this profile page and you'll notice that the logical hierarchy is broken.

- The site identity, “nosuni” is in the right place, at the top-left of the screen.
- The search control and drop-down for choosing your visibility, preferences etc. are also in an appropriate position high-up in the “fixed” area (although the area is not represented graphically).
- We start to find problems with the main navigation bar. Because it is right-aligned on the page, it doesn't actually dominate the page contents spatially. What is superior: The “home” link or the profile picture? It's not clear. It could be possible for the “home” tab to own everything on the page, for example if the blue extended into a tab metaphor that physically contained all the contents, the word “home” would be the dominant element within that box, and everything would be clear.
- We get further problems lower down. The topic of this page is actually the person's profile (mine in this case). So the words “Ben Hunt” should really dominate all the content on the page, but they don't because:
 - a) The name has been put in a box that contains just a few details. There are other boxes alongside it or below it. The meaning of this is that the name relates to the other contents of its box, but the other boxes are unrelated.
 - b) The name is positioned at the right-hand side, so it's not even clear whether it owns all the other things within its box.

Original

The screenshot shows the nosuni.com website's original design. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'preferences', 'request a network', 'log out', and a dropdown menu set to 'visible en todo nosuni'. Below the navigation is a search bar and a language selection dropdown showing 'Spanish'. The main content area features a profile card for 'Ben Hunt' on the 'Red Abierta Madrid network'. The card includes a small photo of Ben Hunt, his name, his location ('Born 34 years ago, and you live in Chesterfield.'), and a link to edit his profile. To the right of the profile card are three green boxes: 'View my friends (4)', 'View my pictures (7)', 'View my groups (0)', and 'View my messages (1)'. Below the profile card is a 'News' section with a single item: 'nosUni y Navarra en la radio'. This item has a brief description about a radio show and a link to more information. Further down are sections for 'messages' (with one message from 'nosUni: David Iglesias quiere ser tu ...') and 'Fotos recientes de amig@s' (which currently says 'No Friends Yet'). At the bottom of the page are links for 'About', 'Advertise', and 'Contact Us'.

The first thing we needed to do with the redesign was fix the logical hierarchy to follow the natural cascade of meaning inherent in the content.

Redesign

Online! Juan Martinez, Patricia Esteban, Juan Moar, Julia Moreno Desconectar

nosuni

INICIO **PERFIL** **AMIG@S** **FOTOS** **MENSAJES** **GRUPOS**



Ben Hunt
Red Abierta Madrid
34 años - Chesterfield, UK

Perfil **AMIG@S** **FOTOS** **GRUPOS**

enviar mensaje 

estudios

Universidad	Sheffield
Carrera	Communication
Año	Ex-alumn@
Instituto / colegio	Mulhacen (Granada)
Ciudad	San Sebastián / Granada
Idiomas	Español English Français Deutsch

personal

Relacion	Casad@
Aficiones	Internet, guitarra y cantar, gym
Locales favoritos	Peak District, England. Sydney, Australia. Red Sea.
Musica favorita	Loads of different music, especially folk, trance, hip hop.
Películas favoritas	Fight Club, Last Temptation of Christ, Lord of the Rings...

grupos a los que pertenezco

Negresco, chucero, Grupo montaña EEPP S.Fernando

información de contacto

Etc. Etc.

amig@s + 7



icebrrg
web forms made chillingly simple

fotos recientes + 21

 Mas nuestras	 Joder con las nuestras
 Con su parejita	 Mis pies

invita amigos  

[Descripción](#) | [Anúnciate](#) | [Contáctanos](#)

This layout demonstrates classic containment in action. We're in the "Amigos" tab, so the profile belongs to (or is in the context of) your friends. The green colour reinforces the ownership.

- The contents of the green area are visually related to "Amigos", being tied by the solid green background colour.
- The profile name and picture are equivalent in superiority.
- The 2nd row of tabs are clearly "children" relating to the profile, because they're spatially inferior and also sit inside the green "Amigos" area.

The main contents are arranged using only white space (no boxes, saving pixels) where possible. I've used text size and colour together with spatial superiority to relay meaning.

- The repetition of positioning/alignment, colour, and text size tie the H2s (esudios, personal, etc.) together.

The 2nd column contents are arranged in simple boxes with headings. The meaning of each box is clear (if you know Spanish), because the heading is dominant both spatially and through the larger size & colour of the text, the colour repeating the high-value colour of the main page heading.

Note the little shortcut I've used to show "more" friends/photos. This profile actually has 13 friends, but if I showed them all it might push the photos too low. There are 25 photos in total, but again we don't want to see them all at once.

So I've shown just 2 rows of each item, and created a small "+7" button graphic style to say, "there are 7 more of these, and you can click this to get them".

8 Navigation

*"I find the great thing in this world is not so much where you stand,
as in what direction you are moving."*

Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809 - 1894)

It is the designer's job to make the process of moving through a web site thoughtlessly easy.

First, of course, we need to help visitors believe that they are in the right place. Then, we need to create a scent trail that helps them proceed confidently towards what they came for.

If you've sorted out your screen real estate, it should be obvious where to find the main content, and where to look for links elsewhere, i.e. main navigation and links in content.

In a later chapter, I'll go into specific techniques for managing the visitor's attention, helping direct the eye to the right places. First I'll address several specific design techniques and show some examples of scent trails in action.

Navigation fulfils important functions in both answering the "Am I in the right place" super-question, to qualify the site to a new visitor, and then **also** in providing a scent trail to help them move forward.

Navigation:

1. helps you know **where you are**. Like signposts, scanning the list of top-level options gives you an impression of what else is around. (In this capacity, it's also influential in defining the brand.) Nav should also indicate where in that structure you are right now - "You are here".
2. helps you know what **options** you have: where you can go, and what you can do, from here.
3. gives you **means to get there**.

In order to do all three things effectively, there are a few simple rules to follow. We need to consider:

- What options to show and when?
- How to label the options clearly?
- What type of navigation elements to use (tabs, buttons, hyperlinks etc.)?
- What's the best order for the options?
- How to make the elements easy to use?

I'll address all these questions in this chapter.

What options to show

Navigation isn't an add-on or a screen feature, or an area of a design.

It's totally integral to the site, its content, its brand and the user experience.

The question of what options to present, and what to promote, must depend on the context of the page. One of the critical issues is what kind of page you're on, and the mode of use.

At a high level, there are two main types of navigation: **Permanent** and **Transitional**.

Permanent navigation

Permanent or Global nav options could be useful from anywhere, and also impact general getability. Types of permanent nav include:

- L1 nav bar/tabs
- “Secondary global” nav (other minor links, not really main sections, in permanent area)
- Footer nav
- Search (it's nav too)

Transitional navigation

Transitional navigation appears in variable areas of the page (content etc.), and is usually more context-dependent. It typically includes:

- Inline hyperlinks
- Buttons
- L2 nav (which changes depending on the current Level 1 section)
- Ads, callout boxes etc. that link to other content

To know which options deserve to be permanent, and which should be transitional, we need to consider the purpose of individual pages. Not all pages are equal. For a start, you have pipe pages and junction pages...

Pipes and Junctions

Some parts on a web site are **junctions**: places from which you can go in several directions. Home pages, section menus, index pages, or decision pages within applications are all junctions. If someone's at a junction page, then clearly they may want lots of options.

Others are **pipes**, where there's a single clear logical next step (towards a visitor or site goal). Here, the basic rule is, if your visitor is in the middle of a process, the goal is directly ahead, so don't give them options that aren't relevant. If someone is halfway through signing up for something, don't offer them links to see your board members, or read articles that might be interesting, because

- a) They're not interested in that stuff at this time, so it's detrimental to their feeling of ease, and
- b) It adds clutter & noise to the page, which distracts from the clear path to the goal. And every bit of clutter can only influence the failure rate of that page in one way!

If you were applying for a bank account, and busy filling in a form, you wouldn't welcome the bank teller suddenly asking you if you'd like to buy a fridge, or read the news, so why do it on a web page?

Case study 11: HotFrog – Add Your Business

I recently redesigned part of a web application for a client, on which companies can add their details and get a listing on the site. It's a critical process for the client, and their goal was simply to improve the completion rate of this process (i.e. ensure an optimal number of people who start "Add Your Business" go right through to the end and actually add their business).

When you load the original page, the first thing you notice is actually a bright red button that's inviting you to start the process you're already in! These are very costly pixels that could easily be saved.

Global nav doesn't necessarily have to be there absolutely all the time.

Original

The screenshot shows the original version of the HotFrog website. At the top left, there's a red button with the text "FREE Create Your Own Free Business Listing!" and a "Click here" button. On the right, the HotFrog logo is displayed with the tagline "Your Australian Business Directory". Below the header, there's a search bar with fields for "What" and "Where" and a "Search" button. The main content area is titled "Add Your Business" and is labeled "STEP 1 of 5". It contains a form for entering business details: Business Name, Street, Suburb/Town, State, Postcode, Phone, Fax, Business Email, and Business Website. A "Next >>" button is at the bottom of the form. To the right of the form is a sidebar with information about adding a business, mandatory fields, privacy policy, and links to products/services, companies, and localities. At the bottom, there are links for About Hotfrog, Add My Business, Advertising on HotFrog, Contact HotFrog, Terms of use, Privacy Policy, and FAQ. Logos for Catch and Reed Business are also present.

Create Your Own Free Business Listing!

hotfrog
Your Australian Business Directory

Add my business | Login

What >> Where >> Search

Add Your Business

STEP 1 of 5

Please enter your business details below

Business Name: *

Street: *

Suburb/Town: *

State: *

Postcode: *

Phone: *

Fax: *

Business Email:

Business Website:

Next >>

Adding your business to HotFrog

The fields marked with * are mandatory.

To be part of HotFrog we require either a street address or a PO Box for your business.

We will not pass your email onto third party suppliers and it will not be displayed on the site, to help stop spammers. Your business email will only be used by HotFrog customers to contact you.

We respect your privacy, view our [Privacy Policy...](#)

Products/services: # A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
Companies: # A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
Localities: # A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

About Hotfrog | Add My Business | Advertising on HotFrog | Contact HotFrog | Terms of use | Privacy Policy | FAQ

Catch

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Reed Business

On reviewing the page opposite, I identified the following issues:

- The identity is in the top-right corner, reducing getability because we all look first to the top-left to answer “Where am I?”
- Does showing “Step 1 of 5” make it more or less likely that I will proceed through the process?
- The important hint text on the right hand side of the form seems very easy to ignore. Low contrast doesn't help.
- Lots of these links are entirely inappropriate at this point in a process, including “Add my Business” (which I'm doing now!), alphabetical indexes, and Search.

One of the first things I did was to **strip out most of the global navigation**, so that the next step in the process got as much attention as possible. Every step of this process was in the pipe, and my only goal was to help people get through the pipe.

The only links that remained in the final process were: “Continue”, “Back”, and “Quit and return to main site”.

The other major change was to remove the feedback control that indicates “Step 1 of 5”.

Because the first step was the most time-consuming, involving completing a fairly long form, I reckoned that showing there were potentially 4 more steps to come could only be detrimental to the “scent”.

“If this form looks like it's going to take me 2 minutes to complete, and there are 4 more steps after this, this process is going to take me some time!

Do I have that much time? How important is this to me?”

Having the number of steps on show actually **felt** longer and was more likely to encourage the visitor to give up than to persevere.

The image shows a screenshot of the Hotfrog 'Add Your Business' form. At the top left is the Hotfrog logo (a red frog icon inside a circle) and the text 'hotfrog Add Your Business'. To the right of the logo is a note '★ = required info'. Below the logo, the form has a title 'A few more details' in red. It contains several input fields with validation stars: 'Business name ★ Jake's Snakes', 'Street ★ 14 Tequila Mockingbird Way' with a note 'Either street address or PO box', 'Suburb / Town ★ Butch Harbour', 'State ★ NSW' with a dropdown arrow, 'Postcode ★ SY3239', 'Phone number ★ 234 567 8910', 'Fax' (empty field), and 'Web site' with the value 'http://jakes-snakes.com.au/' highlighted in yellow. At the bottom are two buttons: a green 'Back' button with a left arrow and a red 'Continue' button with a right arrow. Below these buttons is a link 'Quit & go back to main site ▲'. At the very bottom of the page, there are links for 'About Hotfrog', 'Advertising on HotFrog', 'Contact HotFrog', 'Terms of use', 'Privacy Policy', and 'FAQ'. Logos for 'Catch' and 'Reed Business' are also present.

About Hotfrog | Advertising on HotFrog | Contact HotFrog | Terms of use | Privacy Policy | FAQ

Catch © Reed Business Information 2005-2007 (v1.6.3) Reed Business

How many navigation options?

Simply “Enough, and no more”. Enough to make the visitor's next step easily guessable, so that the meaning of what they'll get behind each option is very clear before they click it.

If you have too few options, or if the content in each section is not organised in a natural, sensible way, you may find yourself wanting to come up with an over-general navigation label like “Discover” or “General info”. Don’t accept ambiguous labels.

Information architecture/navigation can work in two distinct ways.

- One ideal result can be a set of **mutually-exclusive categories**, where you can easily and confidently guess the next stepping stone to take. To shoehorn real-world content into neat, balanced sections can be extremely challenging, but there are techniques to help (look up card sorting, for example, or read O'Reilly's “Information Architecture for the World Wide Web”).
- A second good result can be to arrange your content into a **grid**, which you could see as multi-dimensional categorisation, such as browsing by Market segments, Price levels, or both.

Whichever route you end up taking, the goal is the same: to enable all visitors to take next steps confidently and with minimal thought.

So think carefully about the items your visitors need to see. Lots of clients commissioning web sites fall into the trap of saying “let’s have a news page” because that’s what a lot of websites have. But saving pixels means you should only make a news page if it’s appropriate for meeting visitor or site goals. When your goals are clear and the steps to achieve them are worked out, you should have no redundant pages.

Beware the “Dead Pit”!

A section like “News” needs to be constantly replenished with material, or the site risks losing credibility. If you don’t have a ready supply of news, don’t create a space that you can’t fill. An empty news page is worse than no news page.

Similarly, if a section isn’t ready to show, resist the temptation to put “under construction”. No-one ever thinks, “Oh, is it? I must remember to come back another time, perhaps tomorrow”! Better to remove the navigation option altogether until you can fulfil the promise of the link.

How to label the options clearly

Navigation is part of your brand

The words you put on each navigation option build a picture of “What I can find here, & where I can go”. This creates a mental picture of what you offer visitors, which is part of the brand experience. So what you choose to say in your navigation options communicates the brand.

Label text on all navigation labels should be one of the following:

- What you'll **get**
- Where you'll **go**
- What you want to **happen** (i.e. an instruction)

Make it 100% obvious what I'll get when I click that thing, and you won't go far wrong.

The two most common mistakes in navigation text are: being too general, and using transitive verbs with no object.

Being too general

We've already seen a nav item labelled “General information”, which sums up the point nicely. Unless nav links entitled “General info”, “More”, or “Other” etc. are totally clear in context, they will create question marks in your visitors' minds.

Transitive verb with no object

Transitive verbs are ones that involve **doing something to something**, i.e. they require an object to make sense. Intransitive verbs do not need an object. “Fishing”, “Looking”, and “Standing” are all intransitive. They're self-contained.

Common useful intransitive verbs you'll find on navigation are “Log in”, “Log out”, and “Search”.

However, “Explore”, “Experience”, and “Discuss” are all transitive verbs. They're meaningless on their own, without an object to affect. “Explore the archive”, “Experience a day out”, and “Discuss this article” are all fine, because they have their objects, so the meaning is complete.

“Contact” is also a common transitive verb used on its own. “Contact Us” is more specific, but the “us” is generally understood implicitly.

It's also good to get the most meaningful word at the front of your link, which is very often the verb. So “Order brochure”, “Cancel request”, and “Back” are all fine.

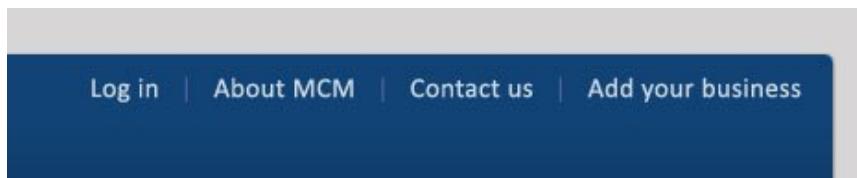
Never put “Click here for...” or “Click here to...” because it adds pixels and pushes the meaningful words away.

If your links clearly look like links, “Click here to” should be implicit.

What type of navigation elements to use

Text links

Hyperlinks on text are best suited to transitional links within content. They should always be differentiated from normal text through colour and tone. I prefer to use blue text where possible, because it's conventional, and blue is a slightly lighter tone than black, so even if someone couldn't perceive any colour at all, it should still be possible to identify the link text as different.



Text can be used for creating simple navigation lists. It's common to separate items with a pipe character (or a subtle border using CSS). The benefits of text link lists are flexibility and very high use of content pixels (in the example above, only a few very low-contrast non-content pixels are used to separate the links).

However, they also tend to be used for minor navigation (this example would be a minor global nav), in which case they'll be toned down or made smaller to work as “links you can find if you need them”. (Note: We used large text links front and centre for the Hexagon redesign.)

No fixed nav?

If you can get away with it, using just inline text links, and having no global navigation at all, can work really well.

Bored of this? Try [calling reporters](#) or [finding websites](#)

media volunteer center

Help over 150 environmental groups nationwide get their stories covered in the media

The Green Media Toolshed "Media Contact Database" provides media contact information to help groups campaign for positive change.

With less than 15 minutes of your time, you can help maintain a vital directory of journalists, saving groups you care about time and money.

[Skip the intro and get started](#)

How you can help

Helping is easy! You can start helping to build and maintain the media directory now. Just click on one of the tasks below to get started.

Check for Duplicate Addresses ▶

Many address in the database look different to a computer but are really the same. We need people to look at them and tell us which ones are really the same.

Find websites for outlets ▶

This is a simple way to help flesh out missing data from the GMT Shared Media Database. Simply try to find the homepage for the given media outlet.

Call a reporter ▶

This is the most valuable thing you can do to support the Media Contact Database. Just call and check & update key data (spelling of name, fax, email etc).

Here's a preview of the redesign I did for the "Media Volunteer Center". It has no permanent navigation, relying just on intuitive inline links and buttons, right where you need them.

Breadcrumb trails

A very common type of variable (non-permanent) horizontally-arranged text nav is the breadcrumb trail. This is useful on sites that have more than 2 levels of content, and consists of a list of links that displays each point in the information hierarchy. They're effective because they provide useful "You are here" information, as well as navigation options to jump back up to any point above the current page.



A classic breadcrumb, showing the current position in the scheme of things (normally positioned above the main heading in smaller text).



This alternative type of breadcrumb implements the back-links as part of the main page heading, which also has the accessibility benefit of increasing target size.

Tabs

Tabs work very well in the correct context, i.e. when they look and work **like real tabs** in stacking files. The current file is the one at the **front** of the stack, which then opens to contain documents.

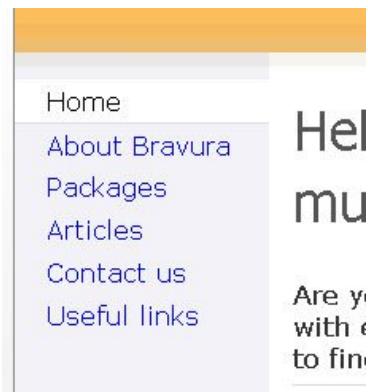


For the metaphor to be believable, the tab should appear to be physically part of the page below it. It is good for the tab colour or outline to encompass the whole content area. In the example, the tab and the content area are a single solid white area. The eye can follow the white area up to find the current section.

Because the tab is the bit that sticks up highest, the label on the tab **represents** (or owns) all the content below it. In this way, tabs are very getable.

Plus, tabs are always navigation, right? It takes no thought to recognise them. Any further navigation within the same section should all happen on the page area within the tab.

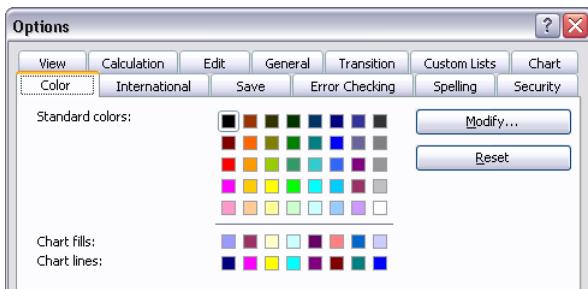
Tabs can break down when the content does not belong in mutually exclusive groups, i.e. When one piece of content could exist (or does exist) in more than one tab. You can't have two tabs both selected, as one has to be one top of the rest. You are also limited to one row of tabs, because when there are multiple rows and one of the top row tabs is selected, it should really cover and hide any lower rows.



Tabs can also be constrained by the horizontal width available. It is difficult to arrange tabs vertically, because words are horizontal, and so a horizontal arrangement is most space-efficient.

In this example of horizontal tabs, the benefit of the tab effect is minimal. The vertically-stacked tabs don't do much to break the outline shape of the main content area, compared to if the current tab were joined to the content area along its long edge.

Here's an example of another tabbing mistake, which breaks the real-world metaphor: multiple rows of tabs.



While it's *possible* to have several repeating rows of tabs in a filing cabinet, it doesn't translate to screen user interfaces, because the tabs have to re-stack themselves and so move around when clicked.

Tabs can work directly in conjunction with a second layer of navigation. Sometimes this is another row of tabs, as we used for Nosuni, but this can be difficult to get right, as you risk nesting the content twice in order to preserve the physical containment effect of both sets of tabs, as in the example below, where the spatial ownership gets fussy to getability's cost (see the Nosuni case study for an example).



More common than 2 rows of tabs is to use a list of text links as the 2nd-level nav.



Navigation bars

Bars of navigation links are also very common. They work in a similar way to tabs, but because they are not mimicking real physical objects, they are not bound by the same constraints. They should of course highlight significantly when selected, just as tabs should.

The nav bar below uses tonal contrast combined with a white arrow to indicate the current section.



The nav bar below is very gettable, but as it floats separate to the content, the links don't work like tabs. This one uses a secondary bar that contains status messages or alerts, a text-size control, and search.



Here's a neat way of showing context-dependent second-level navigation with a button bar. The second row of buttons hangs underneath its level-one parent.



Buttons

Buttons can appear anywhere, just like text hyperlinks, but they feel different. We're used to using buttons on forms, where clicking the button not only tends to take us somewhere, but also submits some information, which can cause something to happen.

For me, buttons should be used exclusively for making something happen, rather than just going somewhere else. So when you click a button you should either expect to send some information somewhere, receive something, or commit a data change to a database.

That doesn't just go for buttons that are actually form elements, but also for graphics that *look like* buttons, i.e. which use 3D effects to make the graphic seem to stand proud of the page as though clickable.



In this example, the navigation bar links are not true buttons. The only button is “Search”, which deserves to be a button as it will make something significant happen (submit the data you've entered).

Other navigation devices

The navigation styles I've already described probably account for 95% of navigation you'll find in the wild.

There are more specialised and customised methods of navigation, including using form controls like drop-down boxes, and also custom image & text navigation bars like these. To be getable, custom nav bars need to stand apart in plenty of space, and be positioned in an obvious place.

This example uses realistic graphics to represent each section, which have very low colour levels and become bright on mouseover.



The design below uses symbols combined with a very strong “on” state. Both examples are identifiable as navigation through their position (at the top of the screen), spacing away from the content, proximity to the site identity, plus a regular stylistic pattern in the combination of image & label text.



Another very strong navigation style is the basic inline hyperlink, and it should not be overlooked. Inline links benefit from being read as part of content (provided the content is readable). If you put a hyperlink in the introductory paragraph of an article, you can expect a high proportion of visitors to read through the link, which will make it about as prominent as a link can be, with very low ignorability.

How to order your navigation options

The order of navigation depends on a combination of **logic, goals & brand**.

Logic

Sometimes, there's just a natural grouping of elements that feels sensible.

- If you offer “Products” and “Services”, these would seem to belong together.
- It is conventional to find “Contact us” at the end of a navigation bar, or on the right hand side of the layout, because you would logically expect someone to want to get in contact **after** they've found a reason to do so in the rest of the site.

With a page that reads left-to-right, navigation options nearer the **page origin** (the top-left corner of the layout, i.e. the highest or leftmost ones) will have **spatial superiority** over later options. You naturally expect the first of anything to be the most relevant or important.

If you have a “Home” link in your navigation list, this should go first, as it equates to, relates to or owns the whole site. All other sections are logically subordinate to “the whole site”.

Goals & Brand

The site's goals, or the brand image you wish to portray, may influence the order of navigation options. With the Alternative Energy Store, we simplified the brand to 3 options, but “Store” remained the first and default option, because it's core to the brand.

How to make navigation elements easy to use

Basically, navigation is easy to use when it's 100% obvious what selecting it will do.

That means:

- It should be distinct from non-navigation, and **clearly clickable**. You should never have to wave your mouse at something to find out if it's nav or not.
- Its label should state clearly and unambiguously **what you'll get** for clicking it.
- The clickable area should occupy the **whole extent** of the visual element.
- Plus, the entire visual element should **respond positively to receiving focus** (via mouse or keyboard).

Clearly clickable

If your screen real estate is clearly marked out, any areas reserved for navigation should be obvious, and if you've used conventional navigation techniques throughout, it ought to be clear what is clickable.

Whole area is clickable and responds positively to focus

Responding positively really means that the whole area of the navigation item should change colour or tone when selected.

Responding **positively** is an important point, and one which is quite often missed. When you select a link, it should change in a way that makes it **more alert or alive** than its unselected state.

So, if you're doing it with tone, a dull grey should become lighter or white. A dull colour should get brighter. Text could **get** an underline, but should never **lose** its underline (because losing something is a negative change).

The “wake up” effect

The effect should always feel like the navigation option is becoming brighter and more appealing. A nav item that reacts negatively to focus seems like it wants to shrink away and hide from attention, which can't be good for anyone's brand.

Negative responses I've seen include:

- Becoming duller on hover (i.e. from light towards mid-tone)
- Losing underline (this is always weird, like the link says “I'm a link” until you go up to it, when it shies away and says “No, I'm not. Don't click me!”)
- I've actually seen one site where an advertisement blurred on hover. I hope I don't see it again.

The default way for browsers to identify text links is traditionally with a special colour and an underline, and to respond to hover with a cursor change.

Sometimes, I'll only go halfway and just make the text in a tab underline, but I'll always make sure that the entire extent of the tab is a clickable area, and the text will highlight whenever the mouse is anywhere in the tab. (Ideally, I should have this tab lighten on hover as well.)



I usually prefer not to have the underline in the normal state, as it can make a link a bit **too noticeable**, but then to add both an underline and a highlight colour (usually red) on hover/focus, in order to emphasise the “wake up” effect.



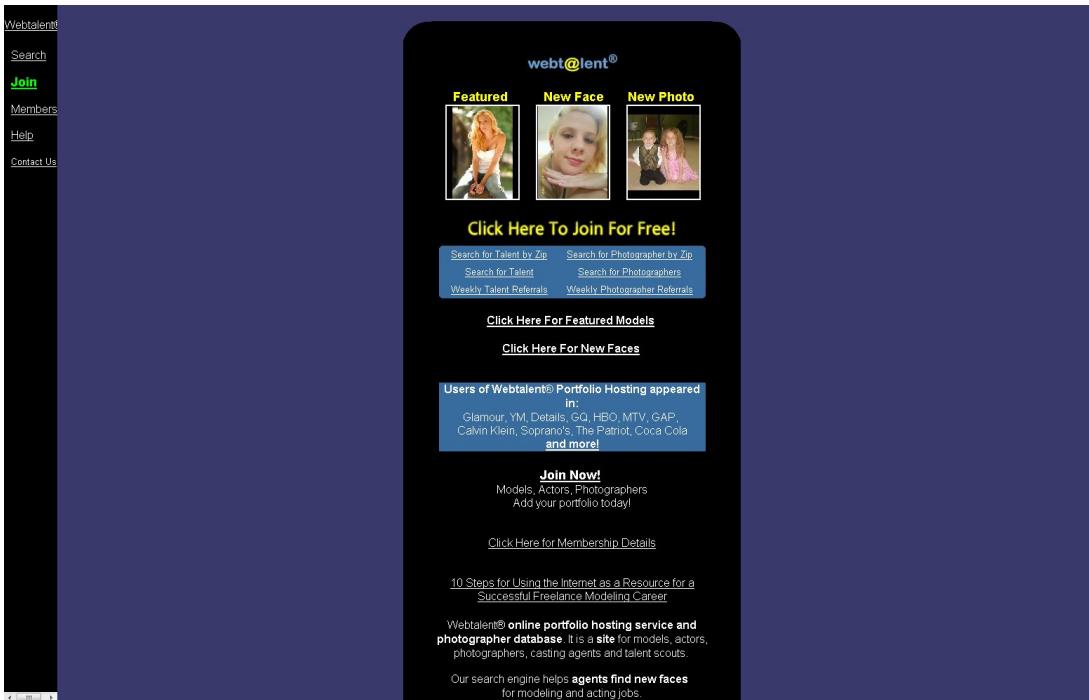
Here's a very original navigation bar we did that uses irregular shapes (on <http://ingoaccountabilitycharter.org>).

Notice that the entire area of each link is still differentiated (with the blue colour), and that the same entire area responds when any part of it is hovered over (turning white).

Case Study 12: Web Talent

Web Talent is an online database of models, actors, and other where clients and employers can find the talent they need. It has been online for over 10 years, and has not changed in a while. The style and level of usability are clearly out of date.

Original



The first thing you notice is lots of dark blue, which feels overbearing and cold, which is the opposite of the bright and youthful

The main navigation is way over on the left hand side, entirely separated from the content by a sea of blue. You should never need to say “Click here” as a nav item should clearly be a nav item anyway. The other thing “click here to” does is to push the useful words deeper into the phrase (which makes them less likely to be scanned.)

webtalent 

the place to see and be seen

 search  join  members  contact us  help


featured member

Gender: Women Age: 18+
Category: --- Height: ---
Region: --- or Zip:

Web Talent helps clients find new talent across the United States

Members can upload their free portfolio, where it will be seen by thousands of visitors looking for new and original talent. Founded in 1997, we're still the best place to see and be seen!

Get started

Vestibulum elit magna, sollicitudin in, dignissim sit amet, consectetuer eget, nulla. Praesent tristique arcu ut dui.

Models & Actors [Register for free](#) and upload your portfolio pictures
Looking for models or actors Use the search above to find the talent you need
Find Photographers Use our [Photographer Search](#)

Newest members


krazykid, MI


Tonia, NV


Benice, WA


Jamal, NY

The main objective of the Web Talent redesign was to make the site appear contemporary, alive, and relevant, so that people would trust the brand enough to submit their profiles or searches. So it needs to be gettable as a friendly, vibrant social space.

- A clear heading and introduction say concisely what the site does and how it works.
- The main navigation options are similar to the previous design, but they're much bolder and positioned centrally, which gives you more accessible clues about the site and brand.
- The “Newest members” subsection makes the site feel active. (The site doesn't have to say when each newest member joined; but the implication is that there's a high turnover of new faces.)
- Providing a search form on the home page gives a strong scent and encourages visitors to test the service.
- The new simple logo and Polaroid-style “featured member” picture reinforce the impression that the site is oriented towards the photographic medium.

9 Noticeability

*"What information consumes is rather obvious:
it consumes the attention of its recipients.
Hence, a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention
and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the
over-abundance of information sources that might consume it."*

Herbert Simon (economist)

Your visitor's attention is a valuable resource that needs careful management

If the purpose of visual design is to *facilitate communication*, its primary technique is *managing attention*.

Noticeability may just be the most important thing in web design. When a visitor arrives at a web page, if the things she notices first are not things that answer the big question “Am I in the right place?” then the page may fail to keep her attention. On subsequent pages, if she fails to notice the scent trail that will take her to her goal, the process may come to an end.

None of this is the visitor's fault. Noticeability is in the hands of the designer, and it's the designer's job to make sure that the right things are noticed first.

Managing attention is about:

1. Deciding what the relative importance of various elements should be, in the context of the visitor's and site's goals, then
2. Applying a combination of various visual techniques to make the most relevant elements more noticeable than lesser elements, and removing anything that doesn't need to be there!

What do I prioritise?

Prioritise the most important things, the ones that will help you achieve the site's goals by helping its visitors to achieve theirs. So these will be things that either help the visitor know they're in the right place, or catch the scent that will lead them to their goal. That's it.

Relativity

Not everything can be high-noticeability.

All the noticeability techniques I'm going to describe can be very effective, but they can **only** be meaningful **relative** to other stuff that does not share the same properties.

Some areas **should** take a back seat. It's unusual for everything on a page to have equal value. If you try to make everything stand out, nothing will stand out.

If a man walks into the law firm where he works dressed as Elvis, he's likely to attract a lot of attention. But if he's attending an Elvis convention, he'll blend in with all the others.

Remember the universal Q&A: How much ... do you need?

Enough, and no more! This applies to everything.

Symphony

I'm convinced that the biggest factor in making something look good is simply to make sure it balances the noticeability factors in such a way that the viewer's eye can move smoothly around the design.

To take this a step further, you want the view to move in the desired (useful) way from element to element, in such a way that the appropriate gestalt message or experience is delivered. When all your visual elements work together to deliver the experience you want, that's symphony.

Some elements will be stronger, and some need to be quieter. Sometimes, the overall effect is big and loud, other times it will be gentle. But make sure it's always clear, balanced, and integrated.

9 Principles of Noticeability

There are 9 main visual techniques at your disposal for managing attention:

- Content
- Size
- Contrast
- Boldness
- Colour
- Position
- Space
- Illusion of 3D

- Movement

I'll explain each one of these techniques in turn, using some examples.

1. Content

Of course, the choice of **what** you show has a significant impact on where people will find themselves looking.

Your choice and arrangement of the words you use can catch the visitor's attention, making them sit up and take notice.

Any imagery you use can really draw the eye, so needs to be selected with great care.

In brief, ask: Is your most visually appealing content in the right place? Is it the most useful content, likely to carry your visitors forward, or is it drawing attention to less useful elements?

2. Size

Obviously, making something bigger makes it more noticeable.

How much bigger does something have to be? It depends on how much more noticeable you want it to be. Make things as big as they need to be. Make only the most relevant things bigger, and reduce the size of less relevant things.

Here's a really simple example. Compare these 2 pairs of buttons. The labels are appropriate – brief and descriptive, but both buttons start with the same word "Add", which makes it slightly laborious to get the sense of each one.

Add section

Add product

Add Section

Add Product

In the first pair, the "s" of "section" and the "p" of "product" are lower case, but in the second set, I've capitalised these letters, making the buttons much easier to distinguish. You notice the "Add" is repeated, and ignore it. The larger capitalised letters help **emphasise what's different** about the buttons. (An alternative solution may be to use a "+" in place of the word "Add", which would increase the relative difference between the buttons still further.)

Size compounds all other effects. If something is brightly coloured, bold, high-contrast etc., making it bigger too will multiply the effect of the other noticeability factors. You can relative size this to fine-tune the balance of noticeability. (Size is such an important factor, it gets a chapter of its own – zooming – later.)



Here's my front page for a site for famous ice cream maker's Frederick's (fredericksicecreams.co.uk).

The page is totally dominated by the main splash image of the ice cream cone, leaving you in no doubt what this site is about.

The text "6 times winner best ice cream in Britain" is large and noticeable because that's all you need to know when you arrive at this web site. After the visitor has taken on that simple message, the navigation will tell them what else there is to do on the site.

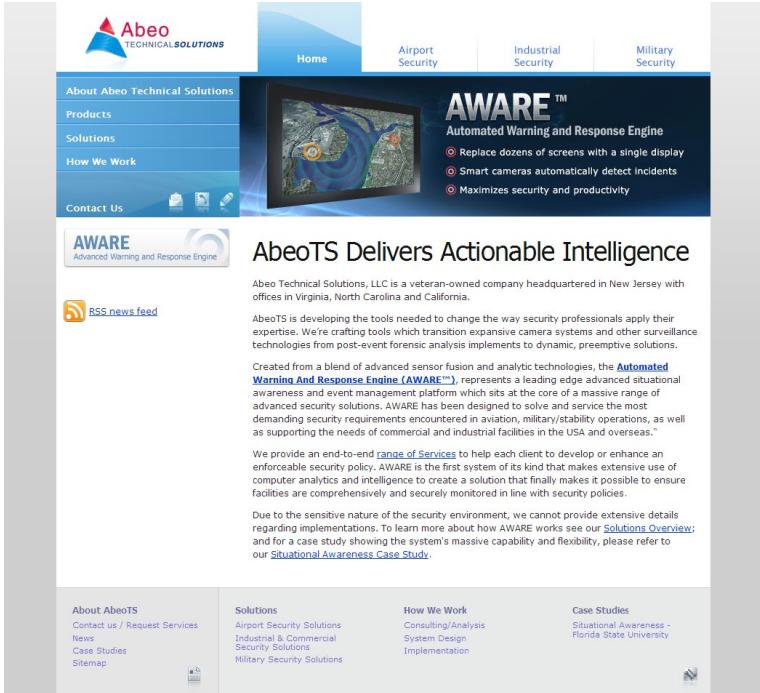
3. Contrast

Tonal contrast between two areas draws the eye. The greater the **difference in tone** (brilliance, luminosity), the stronger the draw.

The larger the shape of positive tone, the greater the effect of contrast. A small area of contrasting tone will be less noticeable than a larger object. Also, hard & straight edges of solid contrast draw the eye more than soft or broken edges.

Notice how much more easily your eye settles on the higher-contrast text.

Contrast	Contrast	Contrast	Contrast	Contrast
Contrast	Contrast	Contrast	Contrast	Contrast
Contrast	Contrast	Contrast	Contrast	Contrast
	Contrast	Contrast	Contrast	Contrast



One of the most common design mistakes I see is **insufficient tonal contrast** on a page.

At the very least, a home page should have one area with significantly high contrast to help draw the eye. This will normally correspond to the page's **focal point**.

In this example from abeots.com, notice where the highest contrast is, and how the blue bands also point to the focal point – the start of the content.

The main page heading will often be the focal point, as it's the introduction to what the whole page is about.

In general, you'll be safe adding contrast rather than removing it (remember how screen blindness will make you tend to strip out colour and contrast to make your design easier to look at for long periods – the opposite of what it needs to succeed in real life). As a result, most web sites don't have sufficient tonal contrast.

I recently ran an experiment, in which I reduced the contrast of the body text on a popular article on my web site from black to dark grey for a week.

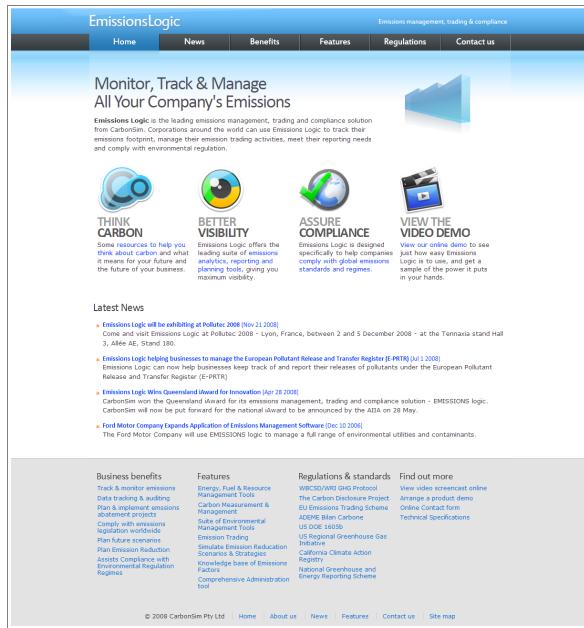
Readers spent 7.7% less time on the page than they did in the previous month.

Times you might need to tone down your level of contrast could include:

1. Deliberately to detract attention away from an area of low priority
2. When you want to balance the noticeability across related elements (like icons or callouts)
3. Where an interface is likely to be used for extended periods, and so needs the overall impact to be soft on the eye.

More contrast examples

Emissions Logic



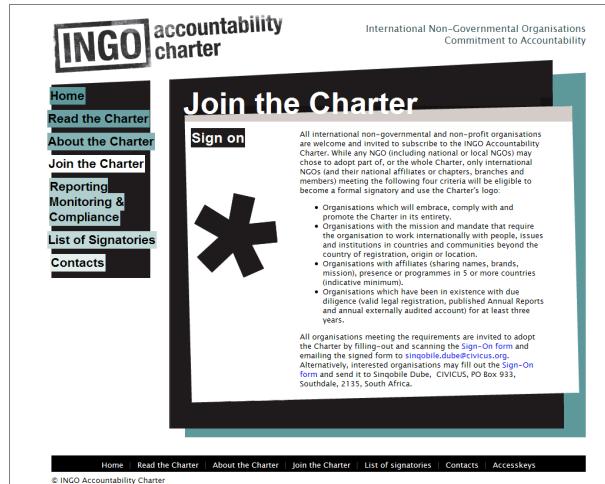
My design for emissionslogic.com shows a conventional application of contrast.

Every area of the screen has reasonable tonal contrast, which helps you discern the text and images cleanly.

However, the area we want visitors to focus on is the main content in the middle of the page, so that area has the highest contrast: white background and dark text.

Notice how the grey background of the footer reduces the tonal contrast on the links to keep attention on the main content.

INGO Accountability Charter



This unconventional design has unusually high contrast, with lots of black against white, using a neutral and flat third colour.

As the purpose of this site (ingoaccountabilitycharter.org) is to make a bold joint statement from a number of non-governmental organisations, the high contrast and diagonal lines work to remind the visitor of rapid, low-cost printing that you might already associate with activism.

4. Boldness

Emboldening text (or shapes or lines) makes them stand out more (against less bold elements that are on the screen).

Emboldening is actually increasing contrast through bigger size. What emboldening actually does is increase the area of solid lines, to create larger shapes of positive tone. The greater the area of the positive shape, the higher the contrast.

Making text bolder works up to a certain point, after which the effect can be counteracted by lower readability.

Franklin Gothic
Franklin Gothic
Franklin Gothic
Franklin Gothic
Franklin Gothic
Franklin Gothic

With light-weight text, the lines are very thin. The shape of letters is easily recognisable, but the lines themselves are not particularly noticeable. With normal and bold weights, the size of the lines increases and letters stand out more and draw the eye.

When you get into the heaviest weights, the lines can become thicker than the negative spaces between them, resulting in something more like a solid shape with lines cut out. While the overall effect is attractive, readability is reduced, so use very heavy weights sparingly.

Boldness Relativity

Emboldening words or phrases in a paragraph of text can work really well to draw attention to that text, but making all your text bold doesn't make it all more visually "sticky". Bold text is more tiring to read than normal-weight text. Otherwise, most text would be bold, wouldn't it?

In this example (hmcelectrical.com), the navigation uses a combination of bold titles with longer text descriptions.

The bold titles draw the eye and are easy to scan to get an overview of what the company offers, while the light weight descriptions underneath offer clarification.

You actually need to design for two different modes of reading: scanning and skimming. Scanning is looking for general pointers that you're in the right place, while skimming is actually reading some of the content to find the content or links you need.

Bold text helps with both, but a good tip is to ask “If I removed all non-bold text, could someone still get they're in the right place?” That will tell you how scannable your page is.

5. Colour

Colour can be great for setting the feel of your site, for conveying meaning, and for managing attention. Different colour combinations create different moods, and can trigger powerful emotions (such as red for danger, sky blues for hope, green for nature and growth). There are whole books written on the subject of colour, and it's impossible to do more than scratch the surface here.

As far as noticeability is concerned, bright colour draws the eye, but only when it is **distinct** from the things around it. If your whole design is a bright mixture of bright colours, then colour can't work as a differentiating technique.

It's good to reserve one or two colours that stand out from the design's general theme, to use for highlighting. These will normally come from near the opposite side of the colour wheel, so if your site is blue-based, your highlight colours might be orange or red. If your site is earthy coloured, you might use bright green to highlight.

Also bear in mind that not everybody will perceive the same colours as you do. There are various forms of "colour-blindness", the most common of which affects the differentiation of red & green and usually effects males. So it's good practice never to rely on colour differentiation alone to enhance noticeability (for example, putting a red heading on a green background).

Tip: Make sure your design works with all colour removed, relying on tonal contrast alone.

My general advice is

- Be sensitive to the colours and the colour combinations you see around you
- Be aware of how different combos feel to you, and trust your first instincts
- Borrow from combinations that work
- Search the web for colour galleries, and colour wheel tools that will suggest combinations to go with any colour you want
- Only use as many different colours as you need to get the job done, and no more. More different colours will pull the eye in more different directions.
- And remember to work in short bursts, using the discipline of think-then-do, so that your responses to colours and tones remain sharp

Base colours

Once I've thought about the general layout of a design, I'll proceed by choosing the main colours for the main areas of the page (top fixed nav area, content area, and page background).

I nearly always use white for the content area because it's easy on the eye and shows black text sharply. Black text on white scores as one of the most readable combinations in tests (black on yellow is theoretically clearer, but it's a bit nasty to look at). White against a black background is just about as readable, but that sets an underground, edgy, night-time mood that is rarely appropriate for my clients.

Instead of pure white, you could use an off-white, introducing a very subtle tint of another colour to complement the rest of your scheme and style, say if you wanted an old-fashioned feel you might choose a parchment colour. But be careful to maintain the contrast against your text.

Block out your main areas of real estate in blocks of tone or colour, and aim for a good consistent look. If the web page looks balanced with nothing on it, that's a great base to start from.

Highlight colours

It's always good to identify one or more **spot** or **highlight** colours, which you can use to draw particular attention to stuff. These will be more saturated (bright), and often middle-luminosity (not dark, not, washed out).

If a highlight colour is going to stand out, it will normally need to be drawn from near the opposite side of the colour wheel to your main base colour.

Q Vision

The screenshot shows the homepage of Q Vision's website. The header is blue with the Q VISION logo on the left and a phone number (480) 661-1600 on the right. Below the header, there are navigation links: About Q Vision, Laser Vision Correction, Cataract Surgery, and Contact Us. The main content area features a large photo of a smiling woman. To her left, text reads "Arizona's Premium LASIK Center". To her right, there are three columns: "Outstanding Success" (with a bar chart icon), "Safety First" (with a safety shield icon), and "Overcoming Fear" (with a heart icon). Below the photo, a call-to-action button says "Book your Free Personal Consultation Online Now - only takes moments!" followed by a three-step process: "1 Select your preferred location", "2 Choose an available appointment time", and "3 Confirm instantly online!". At the bottom, small text notes the use of LASIK technology and mentions Scottsdale and Mesa locations.

In my design for qvisionaz.com, the site's base colour is blue, which feels clean, fresh, and optimistic, the background is flat grey, giving you nothing to look at, and the content area is white to maximise contrast.

The large photo makes the site feel welcoming, and its flesh tones contrast with the blue.

The primary colours of the icons distinguish them and give the feeling of simplicity.

Skinner

The screenshot shows the Skinner Auctioneers & Appraisers website. The header features a maroon navigation bar with links for Auction Results, Order Catalogues, Search Catalogues, Login, and Register. Below the header is a maroon sidebar containing sections for DEPARTMENTS (with categories like American & European Paintings, American Furniture & Decorative Arts, etc.), SPECIAL EVENTS (with a link to the full list), and LATEST NEWS (with links to press releases and auction highlights). The main content area has a black background. It features sections for UPCOMING AUCTIONS (with three items: American & European Paintings & Prints, American Indian & Ethnographic Art, and Country Americana at Marlborough), AUCTION HIGHLIGHTS & EVENTS (with images of a Hanukkah lamp and a Renaissance Revival chain), and EXPERT'S EYE (with a thumbnail of a magazine cover). At the bottom is a maroon footer with copyright information and links to Terms of Use, Privacy Policy, and Site Map.

The home page for auctioneers Skinner (skinnerinc.com) has a very sharp colour scheme.

The background in this case is black, which we rarely use, but it serves the classical high-contrast feel.

The large areas of black background, white content area, and maroon base colour combine to give the site a colour signature that's bold and memorable.

The combination of flat colours and plain white central area also helps the content to stand out well, so the item titles and photos are what really jump out when you arrive.

(Design by Dan Johnson at Scratchmedia)

Tip: Picking schemes from photos

One really simple and clever technique I've used a few times is to import a photo and import it into Photoshop, where I apply a filter to pixelate it. I can then colour pick a series of complementary shades.

In this example, I applied the mosaic filter in Photoshop to a photo, and was able to pick 3 different original sets of complimentary colours and tones within a minute that could form the basis of a web site colour scheme.



Copyright Ben Hunt

6. Position

As we covered in detail in the chapter on Layout, the relative positions of elements has a strong bearing on how noticeable they are.

There has been a lot of research into how people scan web pages, using smart eye-tracking wizardry. These studies show where people tend to look on a particular screen. (Search for “eye tracking” on Google Images to browse a bunch of results.)

From this, it's possible to make some generalisations on scanning patterns, such as the “F” shape, which shows that we tend to make a number of left-right scans as we move down the page, making the shape of an upper case F.

However, nothing short of running your own eye-tracking lab test will tell you categorically which areas of the screen are not going to stand out, so I'd tend to ignore any general rule of thumb and go with your instincts, direct experience, and common sense when placing elements on screen.

A Note on “Ignorability”

I use the term “ignorability” to describe the effect whereby something that would normally seem to be highly noticeable can seem not to stand out, because it's in the same position as it was on the last page, and so you expected it to be there.

So we can say that structural (universal) elements have an **ignorability** factor. The main content area (which you'd expect to change on every page) is less ignorable.

Use ignorability to your advantage when balancing the visual priorities of elements.

Because fixed areas of real estate have higher ignorability, elements in those areas can afford to be relatively stronger in noticeability features, without unbalancing the layout.

This means your logo can be bold and colourful and sit in plenty of space, which makes it noticeable on first sight, but by being positioned in a fixed “screen furniture” area, visitors can skip over it on later pages.

Similarly, if something is critical (like an error message), don't hide it in a fixed area. Position it as close to the starting point (the beginning of the content) as you can.

The Sky Effect

I'm aware that you can find web pages that seem to contain a lot of graphical detail, yet where that info does not overwhelm. This points to another variant of ignorability that I call the "sky effect". When you gaze at a wonderful sunset, for example, you can take in a huge amount of information. There can be millions of variations of light and colour, yet the effect on you the viewer is relaxing. This may be because there's nothing specific you need to focus on. All the colours and patterns are working together as "sky".



In my design for exhibition stand creators ProShow Europe, the rich background lends the page a certain emotional aura that suits the theme of high-impact experiences, but although there are several colours going on, the effect works in a subtle way, drawing your attention in general, but without detracting from the content.

Likewise, you can use images, in the foreground or background, that might seem to be complex, but can be comprehended by the brain as a single entity.

7. Space

Any element needs a certain amount of space around it in order to be recognisable, and to distinguish it from other things around it.

If you've been economical with elements and pixels, you should have enough screen to give everything a decent amount of space.

However, putting **extra space** around things makes them stand out more clearly, which could signify that they're more important.

Conversely, reducing the space around or between elements can make them less distinguishable, making it harder for the eye to make out their edge, thus reducing their prominence.

That's all for now on space as there's an entire chapter coming up.

8. 3D Illusion

We're naturally drawn to things that appear real, like shiny buttons with a drop shadow that seem literally to "stand out" from the page. 3D effects can make



These icons come from a collection of hundreds in the wonderful "Crystal" family by Everaldo Coelho. Check it out on Wikimedia Commons. Don't these just make you want to reach out and touch them?

These icons share is a credible illusion of being solid 3D objects that both push out of the page towards you, and also appear tangible.

Check out the subtle and appealing matte glass lighting effect on this table (from kathink.co.uk, a site for trading brainpower), including the embossing used to highlight the current row.

CURRENT REQUESTS			Show more
TITLE	VALUE	TIME LEFT	
What's the next big thing in sand shoes?	£1000	30 mins	<input type="checkbox"/>
Need help launching a new coffee brand on UK high street	£3000	75 mins	<input type="checkbox"/>
World-wide travel portal for young people - ideas & help refining business model	£1500	90 mins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
What will climate change mean for the timeshare market in Spain & Portugal?	£1250	2 hours	<input type="checkbox"/>
\$1M in software sales world-wide, what next?	£4000	2 hours	<input type="checkbox"/>
Looking to go freelance in aviation consulting. Want help with strategy & planning.	£1000	3 hours	<input type="checkbox"/>
How would you invest \$2.5M in franchises in Egypt and UAE?	£3000	5 hours	<input type="checkbox"/>
What direction for UK banking with Gordon Brown as Prime Minister?	£7500	15 hours	<input type="checkbox"/>
Selling new cars in North Wales & North West England. Get out now or invest?	£1000	2 days	<input type="checkbox"/>

The realism lends the site a feeling of high quality, while the idea of being able to view text in a transparent glass panel feels forward-thinking and futuristic.

9. Movement

Animated items have very high noticeability. They'll draw attention over static elements (particularly on the edge of your vision, which is more sharply tuned to picking up movement). Because of its power, movement should be used only when it's absolutely necessary.

Some shapes, like strong diagonals, can also create a **sense** of dynamism, which also draws and directs the eye.



Note how the little yellow star on the inglesonline.com.br home page adds subtle dynamism and draws the eye.

(Ever wondered why stars have been used for years to draw attention to promotional ads? It's partly because they combine lots of different non-square lines, introducing dynamism.)

Also notice how all 3 content photos use multiple diagonal lines, lending liveliness and appeal.

Tips for using movement in design

Be sensitive to general eye-motion principles. For example, a shape that actually appears to run off the edge of the screen, or creates a strong dynamic line that points off-screen risks pushing the eye away from the main focal area (central content).

Trust the way your own eyes move when you look at a web page. What do you find it hard to focus on? Where is your attention drawn?

If you find your eye drawn to the wrong point on the page, are there strong lines or edges, particularly non-square, that could be hijacking attention?

Managing noticeability down the page hierarchy

The measure of noticeability changes for different modes of use. Everything should always be clear and easy to read, of course, but it's worth being sensitive to the different ways we look at different parts of web pages.

At the **top** of a home page, the job is to answer “Am I in the right place?”, so the task is to get a few clear messages to come across first and tick off enough boxes so that the visitor can find enough reason to continue. This requires certain words and images to stand out immediately. At this stage, the dominant mode is **scanning**. The visitor is sitting back, with their eye skipping from one high-noticeability element to another, just scanning for clues, to get a flavour of the where they are and what's on offer. This is why navigation, the site identity, the main heading and primary content imagery should be big & noticeable.

On any page, we'll first check out the real estate and make a snap decision about where the most relevant content is likely to be. This is scanning at the large-scale (macro) level. Then we'll look for clues that point to the best section of the page to find what we're looking for.

You'll normally want one main thing in particular at the top of the page to stand out. That should be the focal point, where I should start looking to understand that – yes – I'm in the right place.

For designers, this means that things at the top of the page, the big, bold statements, should be particularly emphasised to stand out against their surroundings, using exaggerated noticeability.

As we move progressively **down** the informational hierarchy, away from the generic to the more specific, the mode of interaction will usually change. When we believe we're on the scent, we'll still **scan** for the next clues, but maybe we'll look more closely, and read a bit more (**skim-read**).

In body text, lower-level headings (h2, h3, h4) get progressively smaller, because here the visitor is probably leaning further forward and looking more closely. Bigger, bolder signs would risk overloading the senses.

Lower down your pages, you can use noticeability factors more subtly, as the visitor's closer attention means they will still pick up on less exaggerated differences.

Summary

Understanding the various factors that affect overall noticeability is the key to harnessing its power. When you're clear about what people are likely to be looking for on each page, and what you want them to notice first, you can apply the noticeability techniques to make every element as noticeable as it deserves to be.

Remember that each technique only works when it has something to be different to. If everything is high-contrast, brightly-coloured, in plenty of space, dynamic, animated, bold and 3D, nothing will stand out and the overall effect will be overwhelming.

As I've already mentioned briefly, all the elements on your pages need to work in **symphony**. When you're listening to a great piece of music, all the instruments work together so that you feel the main theme and also get the solos clearly and powerfully. You're led through the story of the music exactly as the writer intended.

If the sounds aren't working together, you get discord and the overall effect is lost.

It's just the same in web design. All the elements on your page should work in symphony to deliver the flow of information purposefully so that your visitors enjoy achieving their goals (and your goals).

Whether there's a single, strong message you want to shout out, or a mass of news information that may interest different people in different ways, the whole page needs to work as an integrated experience. That means that each element should be appropriately noticeable, doesn't make more noise than it deserves to make, and leads the viewer smoothly from entry to finding their next step.

Case study 13: Boldchat

Original

The screenshot shows the original Boldchat website homepage. At the top left is the logo 'boldchat' with a blue double circle icon. To its right are links for HOME, INFO, DEMO, PRICES, GETTING STARTED, DOWNLOAD, and SIGNUP. On the far right is a button labeled 'Click Here To Chat With Us' with a small orange icon. The main visual is a large photo of a woman with long brown hair laughing joyfully, her head tilted back. To the right of the photo is a yellow callout bubble containing the text 'Want to thrill your customers? Simply engage.' Below this is a quote: "'Lack of trust' is the most frequently cited reason that online customers don't buy. Shoppers want input and advice. And they want to know they're dealing with a reputable company." Further down is a section titled 'See Boldchat in action now!' with a 'SEE A DEMO NOW!' button. The page is divided into three main sections: 'Live Chat Solutions' (green), 'Live Chat Editions' (white), and 'The Boldchat Difference' (blue). The 'Live Chat Solutions' section lists 'Increase Your Sales' and 'Improve Your Support' with corresponding bullet points and 'MORE' links. The 'Live Chat Editions' section lists 'Basic Edition', 'Pro Edition', and 'eCRM Edition' with similar details. The 'The Boldchat Difference' section lists several key features. At the bottom left is a testimonial: 'Boldchat is used by over 12,000 active websites.' Next to it is a 'VIDEO Professor' logo. A circular callout at the bottom right says 'Boldchat v4.60 Is Now Available' with a description of its features.

The page is quite pleasant to look at, with 3 appealing coloured leaf shapes. I find my eye is kept on the page, scanning round and round the leaf shapes, but it doesn't easily settle anywhere, because there's nothing really **useful** that's also **noticeable**. The most noticeable thing is the photo of the ecstatic woman, but there's no relevant content value to that picture. There is quite a lot of content on the page, which makes sense if you read it, but nothing's saying "read me first", so it makes you **work** to figure out what's going on.

The messages really need to be made more specific, to get the brand across. “Want to thrill your customers?” could apply to all kinds of things, not just live chat software for web sites, which is what Boldchat does. Then, “Simply engage” sends a poor message, suggesting that the customer perhaps isn't already engaged with their customers. This could be perceived as insulting.

The real challenge with this product is how to deal with its great breadth. It's a solution that can apply to a huge range of problems, from sales to support. Every customer has a different application for Boldchat's technology, so how do you fashion a message that includes each target category and helps them believe that this solution could be right for them?

Redesign (top part of page shown)

The redesigned website homepage for boldchat features a top navigation bar with links for Features, Demo, Prices, Live demo, and Log in. Below the navigation is a main headline: "Engage your customers with live chat!" flanked by a woman and a man in a business suit. A speech bubble between them contains the text: "Can I get this in size 7? Let me check now... Yes!". Below this are four blue boxes representing features: "Increase sales and conversion rates" (with a shopping bag icon), "Support your customers when they need it" (with an umbrella icon), "Manage all your web communications" (with a Chat + Email icon), and "SmartInvite content-relevant messages" (with a stylized 'S' icon). At the bottom, there are two sections: "Small Business Solutions" featuring a woman at a desk and listing "Manage all your web communications with one app", "Starting at \$24/month", and "Suitable for up to 5 users"; and "Large Business Solutions" featuring a man looking at a world map and listing "Enterprise-level security and scalability", "24/7 support", and "99.9% Uptime Guarantee". A "Customer Testimonials" section at the very bottom states: "Boldchat is used by over 150,000 websites worldwide. Read what our customers say about the product."

Notes on the Boldchat Redesign

- First, compare the overall level of contrast, which gives the design crispness and bite, and makes it easier to engage with. Colour is used sparingly to manage attention.
- The logo is bigger and positioned in more white space.
- The main heading is more specific, and optimistic, but uses fewer words. It uses a number of noticeability factors to make sure it's the first thing you see. It's large, bold, high-contrast (black on white), in a dominant position, and has sufficient space around it to stand out.
- Simple main navigation lets you know immediately what kind of site you're on, and what you can do here.
- I designed a kind of two-way dialogue balloon to illustrate the many applications of Boldchat. The text would cycle through various possible Q&A conversations, quickly building a sense of the scope of use, in a similar way to how a scatter graph helps you get a good high-level overview of detailed results. Orange is reserved as the “spot colour” that draws attention.
- The four central feature blocks add further visual interest and highlight a range of selling points (which could correspond to key checkboxes in the minds of different types of visitor).
- Lower down, two large callout blocks address two high-level groups of Boldchat's clients. They have less colour, to help the orange and blue above draw the eye more initially, but still have lots of contrast and generous space to help them be readable.
- Notice how, further down the page, contrast and colour are reduced. The testimonials keep the content variable, and include a range of useful terms for the benefit of search engines (as all the other content on the page is graphical).

Case study 14: Media Volunteer

Media Volunteer Center is a project run by Green Media Toolshed. It's an online application that lets volunteers help maintain a huge database of media contact data, which is then made available to organizations involved in positive change all round the world.

The original site design was already clean and concise, but the client wanted to know how much clearer and easier-to-use the site could be. They also wanted a fresher, more "Web2.0" style that would be more in keeping with a radical, bottom-up community application, and that would still lend itself to co-branding or re-branding where needed.

Original

The screenshot shows the homepage of the 'Volunteer Center: Green Media Toolshed (beta)' website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with a logo, the site name, and a 'Log In' link. Below the header, a main content area features several sections: a 'Thank you for visiting!' message, a 'Help from your home or office.' section, and a prominent yellow box titled 'Start volunteering in three easy steps!' with numbered steps 1, 2, and 3. Below these are four buttons labeled 'help', 'build', 'call', and 'more'. At the bottom, there are links for feedback and joining the Media Research Team.

The simplicity of the original site makes the content work quite effectively. The points "1, 2, 3" are most noticeable and help the site appear user-friendly, and there's one nice "Get Started" button, which is a fairly obvious next step. But before you start, you need to understand the offering.

The main “help”, “build”, “call”, “more” links don't add much informational value at all. “Build” and “Call” are transitive verbs without objects, which I've mentioned before, and “Help” & “More” are too general to be of any use.

Issues with the Original Design

- The biggest problem with the design is the intense background. The deep blue colour draws your eye away from the content in the middle.
- Also note the slight 3D effect around the edges of the light blue central panel. That increases the contrast with the deep blue, which further contributes to drawing the eye away from content.
- The dark yellow links, like “Take a quick tour...” have very low tonal contrast against their background tones.
- There is also not enough contrast on the body text to help identify the starting point, or to be easily readable.
- Finally, the top section feels entirely cut off from the main content area. The content is floating on a panel of its own. If the site identity were floating just above it, within its left & right edges, it would be logically associated with the content. But it's right up at the top of the screen, separated by the solid light grey bar. This creates two separate sections of the page, with no congruity to link the ID to the content below.

Redesign Notes

Our redesign uses brighter, fresher colours. Strong contrast has been used much more sparingly. The background is a very soft light grey with a subtle gradient that gives feeling of light from above.

The central content panel is standard white, and while there's a clean line between the content and background, it has low tonal contrast to avoid drawing the eye. At the top of the content panel is a very strong lime green area, which draws the eye, creates a focal/startling point, and also gives the design a youthful energy.

The intro block below simply uses a lightened version of the same green. Just increasing the brilliance makes the block itself less noticeable, and creates high contrast with the black text, but it still looks like it belongs with bright green.

You can help by doing three distinct tasks in Media Volunteer. I've used different bright colours for each of these: orange, bright pink and blue for the headings and arrows (which indicate links and steps forward on the scent trail).

Redesign

The screenshot shows a web-based application for managing media contacts. At the top, there's a header with the logo 'media volunteer center' and a sub-header 'a project of the Green Media Toolshed'. Below the header is a prominent green banner with white text: 'Help over 150 environmental groups nationwide get their stories covered in the media'. The main content area has a light gray background. It features several sections with different colored headers and arrows:

- How you can help** (green header)
 - Helping is easy!** You can start helping to build and maintain the media directory **now**. Just click on one of the tasks below to get started.
 - Check for duplicate addresses** ►
A screenshot of a table showing address data for 'The Buffalo News' and 'The Buffalo News Contact Office'. The table includes columns for 'Office Name' and 'Address'. Several rows have checkboxes next to them. Buttons at the bottom include 'Skip', 'Mark as Duplicates', and 'No Duplicates'.
 - Find websites for outlets** ►
A screenshot of a search results page for 'Washington Nurse'. It shows the outlet's name, address, phone number, and a 'Search Google' button.
 - Call a reporter** ►
A screenshot of a contact card for 'Tom Pratt' at 'Whatcom County Business Pulse'. It lists his name, title ('Associate Editor'), phone number ('(360) 671-3933'), and email ('Whatcom County Business Pulse Bellingham, WA 98229-4702').
- This is the most valuable thing you can do to support the Media Contact Database.**
Just call and check & update key data (spelling of name, fax, email etc).
(Note: You need to be able to use the Internet and phone at the same time to do this task.)

At the bottom of the page, there are footer links: '© Media Volunteer Center 2006', 'Log in | Register', and page numbers 'Save the Pixel, 2nd edition' and 'p142'.

Case study 15: Fidelica

Fidelica.com was a high tech company that designed and made unique fingerprint sensors. Looking at the original home page, what do you notice first?

Original

The screenshot shows the original Fidelica.com homepage. At the top left is the Fidelica logo with the text "FIDELICA | microsystems". To the right is a slogan "The world lies within your touch." with a hand pointing towards a globe. Below the header is a navigation bar with links: Home | About Us | Technology | News | Information Center | Employment | Contact Us. The main content area features a large image of a fingerprint with a small inset showing a cross-section of the sensor. Text below the image states: "Fidelica Microsystems is a developer of proprietary, state-of-the-art pressure sensing technology that is ideally suited for widespread, mainstream adoption of highly reliable, cost-effective fingerprint authentication solutions." Another paragraph explains: "Accuracy, simplicity and ease-of-use make Fidelica the best choice, from the time a firm first thinks about an authentication solution all the way through design-in and fulfillment, for dramatically reduced hardware costs and maximum profitability." A third paragraph highlights: "Fidelica's thin film-based sensors ensure absolute authentication using ground-breaking biometric technology." On the right side, there is a "What's New" section with two bullet points: "Fingerprint Authentication White Paper" and "Interpreting Fingerprint Authentication Performance". At the bottom, there are sections for "Press Releases" and "Headlines", each containing a list of links.

Press Releases	Headlines
<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Fidelica Enriched product Release◆ Fidelica Evaluation Kit Release	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Your fingerprint will soon be your key to the world - KOVR 13 News◆ Gates predicts death of the password - CNET.com

There are a few elements on the page, most of which draw your eye away from the content. The logo is solid and black, which is noticeable, and it sits on a segment of an oval. Because the rest of the oval shape is off-screen, it leads your eye off the page.

We have a similar thing happening over on the right hand side with the strap line area. The pointing hand has something to do with fingerprint sensing technology, but it's not instantly getable, and the hand itself is coming from off-screen – again leading the eye off the side.

Notice how several noticeable elements seem to be arranged near the edges of the screen. These appealing features will cause your eye to circulate around the content, making it harder to focus on the text that will help you get the page.

There's no meaningful strapline or heading. "The world lies within your touch" is too esoteric and clever to have any value to someone who doesn't already know what Fidelica offer.

There's a graphic alongside the body text illustrating a fingerprint detection technique. This is quite accessible, and at least the shape manages to stay on the screen and not draw the eye over the edge, but the image itself is not very appealing. The colour and the blurred edges feel a bit dirty.

The main navigation doesn't help getability much, as:

- The words don't have quite enough space around them in the nav bar box
- The text doesn't contrast enough in blue against the greyish background colour
- The heavy drop-shadow below the nav bar is dark and contrasting, which draws the eye away from the text
- The text is underlined, which adds unnecessary pixels (the fact it's nav should be instantly getable without the underline) and makes the outline of the words less distinct
- The navigation bar itself does not have much contrast with its background. A solid outline or background colour would help it to be more recognisable.
- And the nav bar is positioned nearer the main content than the branding area at the top of the page. This unconventional placement means that, although the navigation bar looks quite familiar, you have to look twice to find it and get your bearings.

Overall, no message jumps out at you from this design. You have to look closely to read the words in order to understand what Fidelica is about.

Redesign



The image shows a conceptual redesign of the Fidelica Microsystems website. The header features a dark green bar with the company logo (a stylized 'f' with a red dot) and the text "FIDELICA microsystems". Below the header is a navigation menu with five tabs: HOME, TECHNOLOGY, PRODUCTS, ABOUT US, and CONTACT US. The main content area has a light gray background. On the left, there is a placeholder image of a biometric card with the name "HANCOCK, JOHN" and other details. Below the image is the text "May contain copy...". In the center, the company name "Fidelica Microsystems" is displayed in a large, brown, serif font. To the right of the company name is a pink callout box containing three short paragraphs of placeholder text. Further down, there is a section titled "News" with a list of bullet points. To the right of the news section is a "Jobs" section with a list of two positions. At the bottom of the page is a footer with the same navigation menu as the header.

FIDELICA microsystems

HOME TECHNOLOGY PRODUCTS ABOUT US CONTACT US

May contain copy...

Fidelica Microsystems

Duis laoreet commodo pede. Nulla nisl. Integer consequat massa bibendum augue. Mauris volutpat nonummy lectus.

Characteristic spondooly fex quantum singularity investor focus.

Vestibulum elit magna, sollicitudin in, dignissim sit amet, consectetuer eget, nulla. Praesent tristique arcu ut dui.

Donec feugiat, turpis at pharetra ullamcorper, mi leo lacinia nibh.

News

- Curabitur a purus eget odio tempus feugiat.
- Nam eu metus at justo dictum tincidunt. Pellentesque feugiat, leo sed pellentesque semper, orci urna ornare lorem.
- EU adipiscing lectus pede ut massa. Nulla faucibus lacinia erat. Morbi pellentesque.

Jobs

- Software engineer, CA
- Regional sales Director

HOME TECHNOLOGY PRODUCTS ABOUT US CONTACT US

My redesign aimed to communicate the high quality of Fidelica's cutting-edge solution. So I've combined a fairly classical layout (central column with formal top nav button bar, and elegant font for navigation and headings) with rich and lustrous surface effects, using serious black alongside softer greys and brown.

Notes on the Redesign

I've encased all the content within a central panel, which can help contain the viewer's attention. Note the sides of the panel don't have strong contrasting lines to draw attention away from the content, but they're enough to define the real estate.

The top of the panel is a dark, high-contrast header bar that uses the F-logo and a separate logotype. The main navigation bar is strong and highly contrasting.

We always try to keep main body text clear, so the text here is black on white (with the exception of the intro paragraph that's on a very subtle panel), and there are generous margins and spacing between text blocks. All this helps the text to stand out, and large heading styles draw the eye to key starting points.

The side column is lower-contrast, being light grey with various subtle gradient lighting effects that help the page feel soft and tangible, but don't draw too much attention.

I used an actual image of Fidelica's technology in real-world use (on a smart card), which should be more accessible to the site's target audience (potential customers researching what's out there) than the technology in isolation. It's powerful to see that a technology is being used to solve real problems.

Note how the perspective and diagonal lines of the card graphic add dynamism to the otherwise square page. Also, the bottom edge of the card points directly to the main heading – the focal point of the page.

The dark "Jobs" panel at the bottom of the page is designed to draw the eye, because showing that the company is hiring hits a few checkboxes for a few types of site visitors. Firstly, the company is very keen to attract high-quality team members, so let's let them know they're on the right track from the first page. Additionally, the fact that we're hiring shows that we're growing and alive.

Case study 16: Loving Arms Learning Center

Original

The screenshot shows a website with a purple header bar. On the left, it says "Loving Arms Child Care & Preschool" and on the right, "Loving Arms Learning Center (785) 238 - ARMS". Below the header is the main logo, "Loving Arms LEARNING CENTER", with the tagline "no deposit, no return" underneath. To the right of the logo are two photographs of the building: a smaller wooden structure on the left and a larger, more modern wooden building on the right.

Where We Believe That Every Child Deserves

The early years are critical for later life. What does or does not happen during the first few years greatly influences a child's future. The kind of care a child receives plays a big role in how the brain develops and how he will perform academically and socially in future years.

Loving Arms LEARNING CENTER
1531 St Mary's Road
Junction City, Kansas 66441
(785) 238 - ARMS

Program Director:
Tyronica Burks

Hours: 5:45 am - 6:00 pm
Ages: 6 weeks to 10 yrs

Closings

April 6 - Center Closed (Good Friday)
May 25 - Center Closed (Memorial Day Weekend)
May 28 - Center Closed (Memorial Day Weekend)
June 15 - Center Closed (Staff Training)
July 3 - Center Closed @ 12:00pm (No Lunch Served)
July 4 - Center Closed (Independence Day)
July 5 - Center Closed

Events

April 5 - Classroom Easter Parties
April 11 - Pastries for Parents
May 11 - Deadline for Contributions to Food Drive
May 12 - Rummage Sale

Loving Arms Child Care and Preschool is a component of Loving Arms Learning Center: a Non-Profit Organization dedicated to serving the needs of families in the Junction City/Fort Riley, KS Area through education and support.

The glaring error in this design is clearly the overuse of the intense, mid-tone purple that drowns out all the content and makes it very tiring to look for what you want. Being in the middle of the tonal range means that neither light nor dark text shows up with sufficient contrast.

Redesign

In the redesign, we've kept the base colour, but it's massively toned down. The logo now looks much more subtle and gentle, the navigation is clear, and all the text is easy to read.

There's a nice soft pattern in the page background, that helps set the white content area apart, and a subtle lighting gradient gives the feeling of light from above, supporting the peaceful and optimistic mood. The content photo is illustrating the benefits of the centre ("happily occupied").

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Loving Arms Learning Center. The header features a purple heart logo with the text "Loving Arms" and "LEARNING CENTER" below it, with the tagline "no deposit, no return". A large purple crocus flower is on the right. The menu includes Home, Staff, Programs, Calendar, Support, Activities, Jobs, and FAQs, with "Menu Item" repeated five times under each. Below the menu, the address is 1531 St. Mary's Road Junction City Kansas 66441, email info@lovingarmscenter.com, and phone (785) 238 ARMS. It also lists opening hours from 5.45am to 6.00pm. A central image shows a child writing at a desk. To the left, a text box discusses the importance of early years, and another box lists upcoming events: April 5 - Classroom Easter Parties, April 11 - Pastries for Parents, May 11 - Deadline for Contributions to Food Drive, and May 12 - Rummage Sale. At the bottom, there are links for Real-time classroom video link, Parents newsletter, and Enroll your child... with "More..." buttons. The footer contains a navigation bar with Home, Staff, Programs, Calendar, Support, Jobs, and FAQs.

10 Space, the distinguishing feature

"Space is the breath of art"

Frank Lloyd Wright

Space is critical in design

- Space is essential for basic **readability**,
- it increases **noticeability**, helping elements stand out from others,
- it **groups** related elements, and distinguishes unrelated ones,
- and when the spacing is right, your whole design **feels right**.

There's a great temptation to squeeze stuff in to your web page design, just as there is to make stuff smaller. That's logical. Surely getting more content above the fold (visible without scrolling) will help a visitor find what they're looking for.

I'd always seek to strip away **unnecessary content** before shrinking or cramming content to fit. If you crunch your content up too much, it will end up useless. As I'll show, content elements need a certain minimum amount of space around them to be recognisable. Without enough space, your eye can't easily make out the shape of an element (whether text or graphics), so will tend to skip over it.

On the other hand, you can have **too much space**, where meaning is lost through lack of relationships and flow between elements. Proximity is necessary to group together related elements, which aids quick comprehension. Too much space can also make your page feel bare and cold, meaning the eye doesn't flow, carries less impact, and could even feel broken or incomplete – which is not great branding.

There's clearly a balance to be found, and that's the purpose of this chapter.

How much is *enough space*?

To recap, managing noticeability in your web designs is about getting the most immediately relevant elements to the fore, reducing (or eliminating) less helpful stuff, in order to help people access the content or functions that will deliver them to their goal with ease and confidence.

I'll start from first principles, with examples using plain text, to start to reveal the rules behind how space works in visual design.

space between elements is vital for recognition
if everything is close together nothing stands out at all

Can you read that? Without space, your brain has to work really hard to distinguish each word from the next.

When something has space around it, it's easier to "get" because you can **differentiate it** from its surroundings and recognise its shape more easily.

Y e t i f y o u s p a c e
e v e r y t h i n g o u t
t o o m u c h i t a l s o
b e c o m e s h a r d t o
m a k e s e n s e o f i t

It's also difficult to make sense of this text, because, while there is enough space to help us differentiate the letters cleanly, we still have to work to piece together the word sequence.

Birds of a Feather Flock Together

The examples above show how the right amount of space is important because we're used to the fact that type uses spacing between letters, words, lines, and paragraphs in a very efficient, optimally balanced way.

When we group elements through proximity, we're using space. By assigning more space here and less space there, we can show what's affiliated to what. Grouping is a great natural way to assign meaning through the universal visual language.

The Golden Rule of Spacing

Words are really groups of letters. Lines & paragraphs are just greater groups. Words need space between them so that you know when one ends and the next begins. You need space between lines in order to scan from the end of one line to the start of the next. Sentences have punctuation and space after them, and paragraphs are spaced apart so that you can distinguish and scan blocks of meaning.

In fact, the spacing in text can reveal **the golden rule of spacing**. This incredibly useful, simple rule can help you balance all the space in your designs to make an easy, gettable layout.

The rule is:

Elements should be positioned closer to neighbouring elements to which they're more closely related.

The Upper & Lower Boundaries to this rule

There is a minimum amount of space that every element needs around it in order just to be recognisable. No matter how closely related elements are, they should never butt right up against each other (or else they'll lose their identities as individual elements).

There is also a maximum space you can put between elements, where the “relatedness” drops to zero. Adding any more space will not add more meaning. The visitor will end up scrolling through fragmented pages with islands of unrelated content floating in space.

Examining regular text can reveal the logic of this rule

If you look closely at any piece of readable text, you'll see grouping and spacing working together to create a flow that we interpret entirely without thinking.

Spacing in Text

Letters within a word are more closely related to each other than they are to the letters in adjacent words, so they are positioned as close to each other as possible (to make the best use of the available area) while retaining just enough space to be readable.

Words are spaced around 1 letter's width apart, which is greater than the spacing between letters.

Lines are spaced further apart than words (typically 2 letters' width), because adjacent words on the same line are more closely related to each other than they are to words on the previous or next line.

Paragraphs are spaced further apart than lines, because the text within a paragraph is more closely related to the rest of its chunk of meaning than it is to adjacent chunks of meaning.

This is a Heading

- **Headings** have more spacing still, progressively more with higher orders of heading.
 - Headings should be spaced further from paragraphs than paragraphs are from each other, because the heading is related to all the paragraphs that follow (as a group), not just to the next one.
 - There should be more space above a heading than there is below it, because the heading is related to the content that follows it more than it is to preceding content.
 - Notice that these sub-bullets are more closely grouped together than the first-level bullet points above. It's the same logic in effect everywhere.

Fixing the spacing in a layout can make any design feel more natural, clear and gettable at every level.

Remember that the rule is effective, yet subtle.

Small differences, and small changes in spacing, can be significant.

Space should be relative to size of elements – but not proportionally so

The rule gives an idea of the proportions of space in a design, but what scale should we use? How much space is an appropriate amount to start with?

Apart from using your own subjective judgement, one useful rule of thumb is that **the amount of space around an object will be depend on the size of the object**. A group of small icons should require less space between each icon than a group of large icons.

But – you'll find that the space required **doesn't increase in proportion** to the size of the elements. Double the size of your icons, and you don't necessarily need double the space. Particularly with text, as font size increases, the space between letters can afford to reduce. In Photoshop, when I work with small text, I'll find I need to add +40 tracking (i.e. additional horizontal space between letters), whereas headings often have negative tracking.

However, you may find that you want to put extra space around key elements anyway. This could relate to the *scale of focus* that I mentioned regarding size & noticeability.

In the first few milliseconds, when faced with a new page, your visitor is “getting” the real estate – what's where. So they're looking at headings, navigation items, and content imagery. More important elements should have **all** noticeability factors pumped up, including space.

This means that larger elements, being viewed on a larger scale, can merit a bit more space to help them stand out instantly.

That's the rule in a nutshell. Let's see it at work in some examples.

With Active Allowance, kids earn virtual family bank – or other rewards – towards goals.

Active Allowance makes managing fun, and delivers many benefits:

- Help homes run smoothly
- Give children valuable skills

If you have kids aged between 4 and 12, try Active Allowance a try now - with no commitment!

Get started today and you get:

The gaps between the paragraphs are significantly larger than the gaps between lines, so it's easy to spot the start of a new paragraph.

Note how the bullet points under the “benefits” paragraph sit closer to the parent paragraph (which is “about” the bullets) than subsequent text.

News

- Curabitur a purus eget odio tempus feugiat.
- Nam eu metus at justo dictum tincidunt. Pellentesque semper, orci urna ornare lorem.
- EU adipiscing lectus pede ut massa. Nulla faucibus pellentesque.

Jobs

- Software engineer, CA
- Regional sales Director

The News items are grouped closer together than they are to the heading “News”, but they’re nearer to that than they are to the “Jobs” callout box.

Swag from the IHC Store »

Anti-clown activities »

i hate mimes

I Hate Mimes High Quality Black T-Shirt: \$15.95

Play "Slap A Clown" online now

Vote for the scariest TV & movie clown!

The labels for each item are closer to their own item than they are to the subsequent one below.

There is a bigger gap between items in **different columns** than between items in the **same column**.

join members contact us help

Gender: Women Age: 18+

Category: Height:

Region: or Zip:

Web Talent helps clients find new talent across the United States

Members can upload their free portfolio, where it will be seen by thousands of visitors looking for new and original talent. Founded in 1997, we're still the best place to see and be seen!

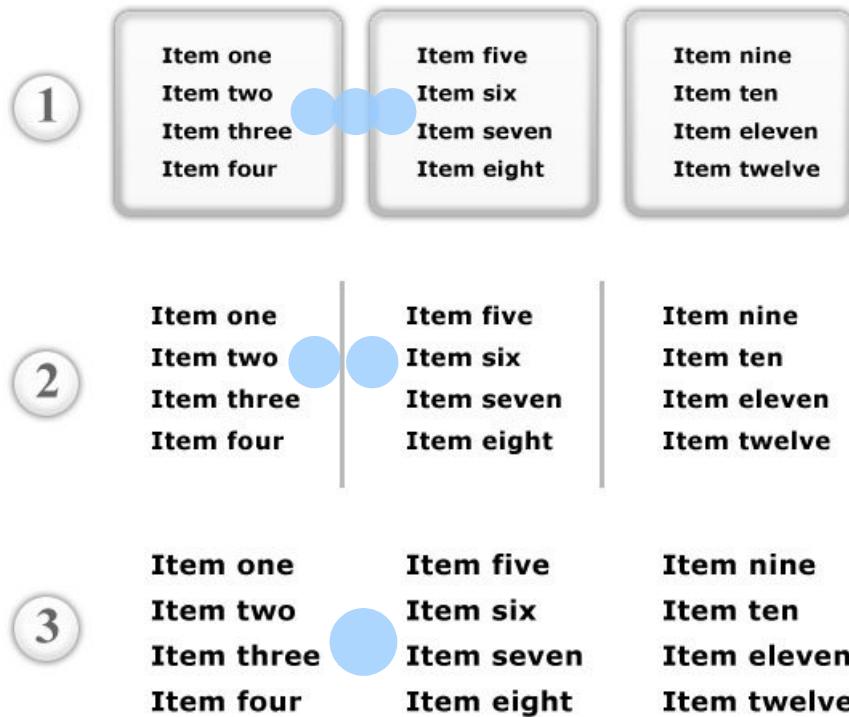
The navigation icons are grouped with their labels, so they would still work without the dividing lines.

There is a larger gap between the form controls and the edge of the form's containing box than there is between the controls themselves.

Why it's better to separate with space than with lines

While the same space can differentiate in both directions, you might need two boxes to achieve the same effect, with *additional* space between them to differentiate the **boxes** from each other.

When you use space, you're not adding any extra pixels to look at, so the focus remains on the content.



In the example above, which set is clearest?

They're all pretty readable, because they all have *sufficient* space around and between elements. But which is optimal?

1. In set 1, all the 3 groups are boxed in. This means that each element needs a certain amount of margin around it, to separate it from the box border. The boxes also need space separating them. So between any two lists, there are in fact **three small spaces**. This eats up valuable screen area, and also adds pixels to draw the eye away from the content.
2. Set 2 is better. The unnecessary lines around the tops, bottoms, and outsides of the lists have been removed, leaving only single lines between them. So I've been able to increase the size of the text, increasing the **ratio of content pixels to non-content pixels**. But there are still two spaces between the lists: one between each list and the dividing line.
3. Set 3 is best, because it uses space alone to separate the lists. The text can be larger (and therefore more noticeable) using the **same** amount of area (or I could have kept the text the same size and used less screen area). Notice that the actual amount of clear space around the elements is also larger, boosting noticeability.

I don't advocate throwing away all boxes and lines, and relying on space exclusively. You often need boxes, lines, and areas of colour or tone to differentiate the screen real estate.

The point is that we should always think twice before using **non-content pixels** to separate stuff. If it's habitual for you to box stuff in, perhaps take a moment to consider whether you can achieve the same effect using space alone, and save a few pixels.

Case study 17: Bokahotell

Bokahotell is a website that lets you book conferences and hotels in Sweden and the Nordic countries. The home page is presenting both services, as well as the direct personal service you get when you phone.

Original



What do you notice first?

The first thing I see when I open Bokahotell's original site is the logo, then my eye moves to the photo of the smiling woman bottom-left with a large phone number across the image.

It's a nice friendly image that makes me feel I can talk to someone and get some personal service. But what does it relate to?



Both the panel to the right and the panel on top are the same distance apart from the photo, so I don't have an instant visual clue whether I should phone that number to find out about conferences ("Konferens"), or to get knowledgeable help ("Kunnig Assistans"), or Hotels, or all of the above. It creates a little question mark in my mind.

Sure, I can work it out easily enough. There's a suggestion of a grid that would say that Kunnig Assistans and the phone number are in different boxes, but the proximity does not reinforce that.

It would be clearer if the relationships were plainly manifested on the page through spacing.

Also take a look at the top level navigation bar. The text has very little padding above and below, which reduces its noticeability, and makes it harder to get "what's where" by scanning the page.

The hotel search box has enough space inside it, to separate its contents from the border, but the groups of form controls within it are uniformly spaced. They all seem to be part of the same group, so I can't intuitively tell the "location" part from the "date" part. It's all one block and I have to read the labels and apply more thought to know what to do next.

My redesign shows a similar amount of content in a similar amount of screen space, but getability is significantly increased, making it more likely the page will succeed.

On the navigation, I increased the gap above and below the text to about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a letter. It's a subtle increase in space, but makes a significant difference.

On the redesigned hotel search form, I've grouped related fields in boxes (fieldsets), each with a simple title. The whole set of boxes is contained within a single colour strip, to reinforce the fact that it's all one group. You can instinctively tell the logical relationship between the sub-groups with minimal thought. I've also made sure that labels are closer to the things they are labelling than they are to other labels. For example, note that the "Number of rooms" label is closer to the number box than it is to the "Guests per room" label.

Redesign

The screenshot shows the homepage of bokahotell.se. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, Book hotels, Conference booking, About us, and Contact us. Below the navigation, there is a section for Hotel bookings featuring a woman on a phone and a brief description of their services. There is also a section for Featured breaks listing various packages with their prices. A prominent Valentine's Day promotion for February 14 is displayed with a photo of flowers. The page also includes sections for Conferences and an Advanced hotel search feature.

Hotel bookings

If you are looking for hotel or conference arrangements in the Nordic region BOKA is your reliable partner, with over 20 years' experience.

You will always get professional assistance whether you need accommodation for one person or 200.

Featured breaks

★ Hilton Stockholm Slussen	from 1192 SEK
★ Scandic Hotel St Barbara	159 EUR/night
★ Copenhagen Hilton Airport	229 EUR/night
★ Hilton Helsinki Kalastajatorppa	199 EUR/night
★ A Romantic getaway, Trondheim	1230 NOK/person
★ Wedding Package Stockholm	329 EUR/person

Quick hotel search

Select nights

27	28	29	30	31	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

Location

Stockholm Paris
 Copenhagen New York
 Gothenburg Other...
 London

Details

Number of rooms: 1 Guests per room: 1

Show deals Advanced hotel search >

Also note

- Extra space around the Valentine's Day promotion helps it stand out.
- Bold headings with healthy vertical space help you scan for what's on offer.
- Placing the photos at an angle and crossing the real estate boundaries adds dynamism.

Case study 18: Franchise Business

FranchiseBusiness.com.au has a comprehensive listing of the range of business franchises available in Australia. Someone looking to purchase a franchise can search by sector or capital investment, browse a number of offerings, and get in touch with franchisors.

In the original design, see how compressed the content feels, partly caused by the extra lines applied between elements (main areas of real estate & navigation items). The lines draw the eye and make the content less accessible. Also, the headings don't stand out with white text on blue.

Original

The screenshot shows the homepage of FranchiseBusiness.com.au. At the top, there's a search bar and a 'View popular searches' link. To the right, there are icons for Advertise and Log in, and a banner stating '980 franchises listed'. Below the header, a large red 'LOVE YOUR WORK!' slogan is centered. Navigation links include 'Buying a Franchise', 'Running a Franchise', and 'Add my Business'. A sidebar on the left lists categories like 'Find a franchise' (with sub-options for capital investment ranges), 'Accounting Services', 'Business Services', and 'Home Based Business'. The main content area features 'Featured Franchises' with logos for Oporto, Kleenmaid, and Matchbox. It also includes sections for 'Featured Video Showcases' (Jumping J-Jays, Signwave) and 'About Franchising'. On the right, there's a sidebar for FCA members and a promotional section for winning an iPod. A prominent Red Rooster logo is visible in the bottom right corner.

Redesign

I kept close to the original branding and content, but notice how many non-content pixels have been removed, leaving more white space, and the improvement in getability at every level.

The headings are far clearer, with bold text in the highlight colour (orange) on white background creating clear letter shapes.

Notice how the logo stands out more clearly, as it now breaks the blue-white boundary. The 3 main navigation tabs are also clearer for a similar reason. They've moved up to the top of the content pane, and penetrate into the solid blue header area.

The screenshot shows the homepage of franchisebusiness.com.au. The header is a solid blue color with the logo 'franchisebusiness.com.au' and the tagline '960 franchises listed today'. Below the header, there are three main navigation tabs: 'Buying a franchise', 'Running a franchise', and 'Add your business'. To the right of these tabs are icons for Australia, New Zealand, and India. A search bar is located on the right side of the header. The main content area has a light blue background. On the left, there are two sidebar boxes: 'Find a franchise by Capital Investment' and 'by Sector'. The 'Find a franchise by Capital Investment' box lists categories like 'Up to \$20,000' (132), '\$20,000 to \$50,000' (224), '\$50,000 to \$100,000' (155), '\$100,000 to \$250,000' (186), '\$250,000 to \$500,000' (96), and 'Over \$500,000' (26). The 'by Sector' box lists various business types such as Accounting Services, Advisory, Automotive, Building & Utilities, Business Services, Computer & Internet, Education & Training, Fast Food, Financial Services, Food & Beverage, Furniture/Homewares, Health & Beauty, Home-based Businesses, Home Services, Leisure/Entertainment, Master Franchise, Mobile Franchise, Office Service/Supplies, Other Services, Pet Care, Real Estate & Property, Recruitment & Coaching, Restaurant & Cafe, Retail, Sports & Fitness, and Travel & Tourism. The main content area features a 'Featured Franchises' section with a grid of logos for companies like Synergy Business, Clark Rubber Franchising, Kleenmaid, Signwave, Safetyquip Australia, Jumping J-Jays, 1800-GOT-JUNK?, 7 Eleven Stores, Kwik Fix International, Matchbox Franchising, Cafe2U Mobile Coffee Franchise, Expense Reduction Analysts, The Coffee Club Franchising, Holy Sheet, Red Rooster, Hungry Jacks, and Domino's Pizza. Below this is a 'Featured Video Showcases' section with two video thumbnails: 'Franchise with Jumping J-Jays' and 'Franchise with MBE Business Service Centres Australia and New Zealand'. The bottom right corner features a promotional box for 'complete the Franchisee Survey' with the tagline 'IT'S ALL ABOUT THE PASSION' and an image of a coffee cup.

11 Design Your Content

*“Say all you have to say in the fewest possible words,
or your reader will be sure to skip them;
and in the plainest possible words
or he will certainly misunderstand them.”*

John Ruskin (1819 – 1900)

“One picture is worth a thousand words.”

Fred R. Barnard

Are You Designing Your Content or its Container?

The core of the “Save the Pixel” discipline is concentrating the use of pixels (visual busyness, detail, attention-grabbers etc.) on **the elements on each page that are most relevant**, so that:

- The visitor gets the overall meaning of the page straight away
- They can answer “Am I in the right place to get what I want?”, and
- They easily find clues to help them follow a clear scent trail to their goal
- Achieving the site's goals in the process

By stripping out non-content pixels, we earn more attention for our actual content. We invest our creative energy in **designing the content, not the box it comes in**. Now, if you're designing “blind”, i.e. without interacting closely with the client's business goals, understanding the target visitors and their goals, and helping to craft an effective solution, you're not really web designing. You're just decorating with graphic design.

Real web designers love designing content

In this chapter, I'll look at the two main forms that content can take: words and imagery, explore the strengths of each and where they should be most effectively used, and give some tips on how to design each.

Words and Pictures

Words and imagery can be amazingly powerful and efficient media for transferring information. The form that works best depends on the kind of information you're trying to communicate. Sometimes, a picture *can* say a thousand words, but at other times, one word can communicate a specific meaning accurately using far fewer pixels.

Text and imagery have different strengths, which is the key to figuring out how to present different types of content to maximum effect.

The first thing to do when deciding how to communicate a message is to ensure that the message is already concise and focused. If you're not clear what you're really saying, to whom, and why, you'll risk ending up with wasted pixels whether they're words or pictures.

Power of Text

Words are usually more direct than images, which means they can be more accurate, especially with abstract concepts.

For example, how do you sum up the concept of “everyone” pictorially? Sure, 1000 thumbnail portraits of people’s faces would *hint* in that direction, but that could still suggest other meanings.

You can communicate “everyone” with just one word, and no ambiguity, and using a fraction of the pixels.

Vitally for web sites, search engines need meaning in the form of text. Optimising a web site for search engines involves simply getting the right concentration of meaning (in the form of words) in the right pages. (While images can tell search engines something about the content, it's limited to the *alt* or *longdesc* properties.) Words can also carry additional semantic value (meaning) by using strong emphasis, or a heading.

Tips for Effective Text

The main principle in web copywriting is: **maximum concentration**.

If you can remove any words, without losing the meaning or impact, remove them without hesitation. Be utterly ruthless. As long as the message is there, the fewer words you use to communicate it the better.

An exception to this rule is the linear selling process. Evidence shows that long sales letters that iterate a compelling series of benefits usually work better than short ones, provided the copy is written well enough to keep the reader reading. This effect is as true online as it is in direct marketing. However long your copy is, it always pays for it to be concise and focused, so remove roughage that doesn't directly draw your visitor forward.

With economy in mind, don't state the obvious. For example, do you really need to put "Welcome to..."? Isn't that understood, by the fact that you've published your stuff on the world wide web. For the same reason, never put "Click here" on a link, unless there's *no other way* you can make it clear that the visitor needs to click there. Be ruthless in your quest to strip out unnecessary words.

Copy Style

Aim to write content that feels natural, open, honest, and accessible. A great tip for writing sales copy is to pretend you're talking to a friend, and just write that down.

People have a good nose for bull, so don't try to oversell. Focus on communicating the essentials, and your message should work. The essentials are whatever answers the question "What's in it for me?" (WIIFM). Whatever you're selling, whether it's a product or service, a cause, an idea, or an opinion, focus on the **benefits** of what you're talking.

Benefits trump features. Features are nothing on their own – they only mean anything when they let me do something I wouldn't have been able to do otherwise.

Front-load

Front-loading is a critical success factor in online copywriting, and simply means putting the most **meaningful** words and phrases at the **front** of sentences, paragraphs, and pages.

Try to think in terms of "good stuff floats". So get as much meaning as possible as high up as possible.

- Put the most relevant words at the beginning of sentences. Newspaper headlines are great examples of this. When scanning, we often read just the few words of sentences to glean meaning.
- The first few words in a paragraph are vital scent signs. Any well-written article should let you get the gist by reading just the first 10 words of each paragraph. When writing for the web, I usually limit paragraphs to 1 or 2 sentences, keeping them to maximum 4 lines in length. (Note: People also often notice the *last few words* in a paragraph when scanning.)

- Headings should always be concise, clear, brief, yet include important keywords. This helps get those highly relevant words and phrases among the first things noticed on a page, makes scanning for meaning much more effective, and it's also great for search engines (which assign higher relevance to words found in headings).
- Bulleted lists often feel more accessible than paragraphs, so use where appropriate. (*In one test I ran on the Save the Pixel “Buy now” page, I tried changing the list of steps to follow from 3 bullet points to 3 paragraphs. The bullets got a 25% conversion rate, while the paragraphs converted just 17% - so the bulleted list performed 50% better.*)

Inverted pyramid

The inverted pyramid is the style of writing found in regular journalism, as opposed to the “pyramid” style you get in academic publishing.

In academia, you start with background information, build, and summarise, then finish with the conclusion.

In journalism (and on the web!) you do precisely the opposite. Start with the money shot, a headline that gives away as much of “what this page is about” in as few words as possible. Then follow it up with a summary paragraph, which tells the whole story in just a couple of sentences (more explicit than the main heading).

Check it out next time you have a newspaper in your hand. Turn to a new page, read just the headline, and think “How much do I know about this story?”. Then read just the subhead or first paragraph, and notice how you've got a bit more detail on the story, etc.

As you work down the page, the content in progressive sections becomes more specific and, more detailed. Your visitor can read this far if they're really interested, or if the thing they need is quite specific, but the point is that they should already have enough idea from the top of the page whether they're likely to find what they need lower down.

Power of Images



Images are naturally richer, and can quickly communicate more meaning on more different levels.

If you're trying to communicate a feeling, or a complex set of brand attributes, the right photo might encapsulate everything you want to say in a way that the visitor gets instantly.

Images can also work in more subtle ways than text. You can add a layer of "feel" using a background image, overlay, pattern, or montage. There's no direct equivalent "background text".

Images impact us on a more subliminal emotional level. We're more likely to believe our own eyes when deciding if we trust people than the words they say about themselves.

Caricature by Scratchmedia's production guru Dan Johnson – for more go to <http://drawmyface.co.uk>

In the two designs below, I've used rich layers of imagery using light and texture to create different moods.



My design for qvisionaz.com uses a combination of imagery for different effects. Soft background graphics lend a sense of gentle quality, the main human photo engages you straight away, and various primary-coloured icons help convey simplicity and accessibility.



A smiling face looking into the camera is proven to multiply the apparent trustworthiness of a page. I instantly engage with Nick Finck's photo at <http://nickfinck.com> (design by Matt Brown of [thingsthatarebrown](#)) and Alan Matthews' picture at <http://transformyourtraining.com>. Both these guys are consultants, but engaging people shots can help you promote most offerings.

Tips for Effective Imagery (the 4 types)

First, it's really helpful to realise that there are **only 4 types of images** on the web, each with its appropriate application. Take a look at any web page and identify which graphics belong in which category.

The 4 types are: **Decoration, Signs, Content, and Branding**

1. Decoration



Decorative graphics do not *denote* anything (i.e. have no specific meaning), but they may help build a particular effect.

Boxes, gradients, areas of screen real estate, backgrounds, textures, and callouts are just a few forms of decorative graphic. These graphics are frequently part of the general page template (i.e. the container), so used on every page.

On <http://emissionslogic.com>, I used subtle shiny plastic and glass effects to help create a clean, modern feel.

Tips: Only ever use enough decoration to differentiate areas and to set the required feel – and no more. Avoid hard edges, high contrast and strong colour, as these may draw attention to low-content-value areas.

2. Signs



Signs are pictorial symbols that represent another meaning, often in the form of icons. They can help signify "this is a link". You often find sign graphics serving as navigation (either for "you are here" or "go here to...").

e.g. On my site, I use special ticked check box icons as background images on visited links, to aid navigation.

Tips: Make icons truly iconic (literal meaning). Avoid using any icon that requires thought to decode. Where helpful, pair icons with text labels.

3. Content



Content imagery is anything that helps convey the message of the specific page, or otherwise carry actual meaning. Feature photographs, product shots, thumbnail images, illustrations, artists' impressions, graphs and charts are common examples of content imagery.

e.g. On <http://savethepixel.org>, I use page shots from the book to illustrate the benefits explained in the copy.

Tips: The amount of attention content imagery attracts should be appropriate to the content value of the image.

4. Branding



Branding graphics refers to logos and other graphics on the page whose job is to help identify the site as belonging to a particular brand.

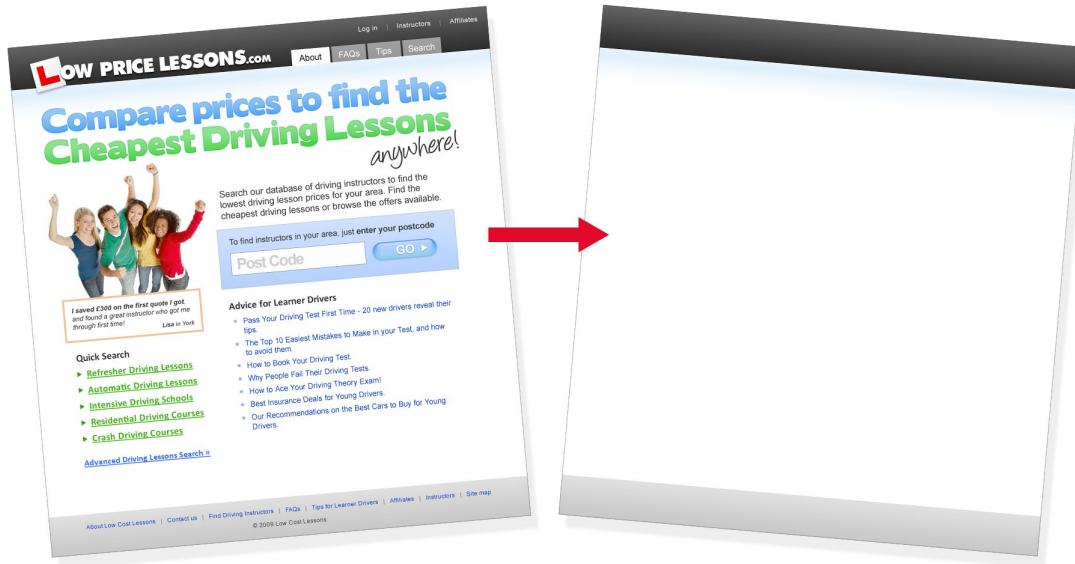
Many sites have a specific colour scheme, background pattern, or other stylistic feature that is applied consistently through all materials, and helps you immediately know that the site is from that "stable".

On the HM Revenue & Customs site, the logo, arrow styles, corner cut-offs, and colour scheme are all branding components that are found consistently through the site.

Tips: Interestingly, branding graphics can often be bolder than their content value would seem to merit, as they're often highly ignorable, due to being present on every page, and frequently positioned away from the content area. This means you can afford to make branding graphics stronger than you would make signs or decorative graphics with similar relevancy.

Try This Useful Exercise

If you stripped out all the content, signs, and branding from a web page design, what would be left? This is an extreme example. My design for a UK driving lessons site has practically no “packaging” at all. Almost **everything** on the page is either content, branding, or signage.



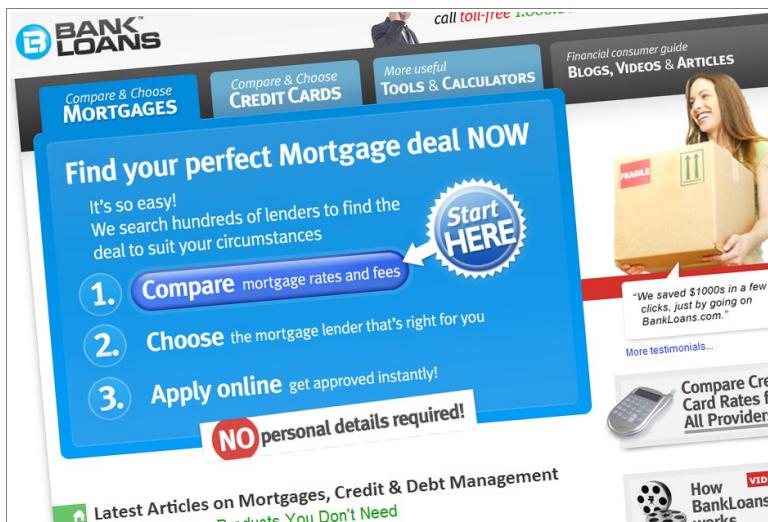
Here's another example, using ProShow, which has a rich background. Again, stripped down to its packaging, you notice that the background, while rich, doesn't draw attention away from what really matters.



Tip: Picture Goals Reached

A really simple and effective subject to show is the **goal-state reached**.

For example, with Bokahotell's conference booking, it would be really powerful to show people smiling and shaking hands at a conference (implying that it has, of course, been set up & is running smoothly).



For personal online banking, it might be a picture of me with my feet up and a glass of wine in my hand! The implicit message is, "*If this (goal-state) appeals to you, that's what we're offering*".

In this example, the home page of <http://bankloans.com>, I used a stock photo of a woman who's clearly moving house without a care in the world, depicting both "home owner" and "easy".

Tip: Zoom in on the meaning

If you have a content image, take a moment to focus on where the **meaning** is. If there are parts of the image that add busyness, consider whether you could crop the image to maximise the proportion of pixels that carry the content. Always look for pixels you can remove without detracting from the meaning.

Another common approach is to remove the background entirely, such as with the image of the woman carrying the box on the BankLoans design above. You could also use techniques like blurring, reducing contrast, or desaturating the less meaningful areas without affecting the composition.

A Great Example of Zooming

Road signs are one of the most fascinating examples of design that often doesn't occur to us as design. Because they have been developed and tested over decades to be instantly getable while moving and in all conditions, they have a lot to teach any designer.

This example of a UK road sign is a brilliant case study of balancing content with white space.

First, notice how much of the available area is filled with content – nearly 100%. The content goes almost up to the edge of the sign, to maximise the noticeability of each element. Nothing goes right up to the edge, though, as then it would have no white space around it to define its silhouette, and therefore would become instantly less noticeable.

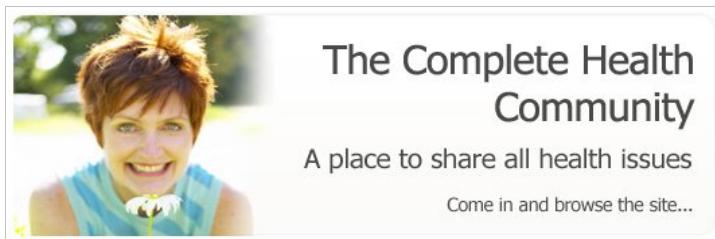
Also notice how there is a certain minimum gap between all the words and symbols, to ensure readability. Contrast is maximised by using mainly black on a white background. All text is the same size, because here it is all of equal value. The size of the graphic representing the road layout is balanced carefully with the size of the text, to ensure the optimum combined getability.



Combining Images & Text

You can get the best of both worlds by juxtaposing **getable imagery** (for instant recognition, emotive content, or richness) with **getable text** (for direct accurate meaning and specific benefits).

So your message contains both the logical or compelling meaning from the text, together with the looser (but just as powerful) emotional, rich, convincing evidence and description from the images.



A Comparison of 3 Different Graphics on Conversion Rate

The three ads below are from a multivariate test I ran on our web site promoting this book.

These combinations are similar, except for the graphic used to illustrate the message. The analysis software (Google Website Optimizer in this case) helps me isolate the exact differences in conversion rate.

Note that replacing the book cover the head shot of the author resulted in a 19% increase in clickthrough rate, while the “Pro Tips” flash outperformed the book cover by 30%.



The book cover is unreadable and doesn't really show up against the background. The head shot of me is certainly slightly more meaningful, and makes the message come from a person. (However, the picture is not perfect, as it is not smiling or making eye contact with the visitor.)

I would anticipate that a more engaging photo would increase the conversion rate further.

Why did the final ad perform best? I would guess that, on one level, it's simply more noticeable. The “Pro Tips” flash benefits by using a contrasting colour, adding another message “Pro” (which connotes quality and value), and also putting the text on a diagonal, which lends it dynamism.

e.g. Active Allowance

- In this site I redesigned, note the inverted pyramid writing style, which gives you a quick overview first and lets you browse down for more info.
- The (content) image of the smiling children is indirectly illustrating the **benefits** (visitor's goal). The photo has no background pixels, so meaningful content is the only thing to see.
- The checklist graphic below the kids carries plenty of meaning with just a few pixels. Both images are backed up with short text labels that combine to hit those mental check boxes.

The screenshot shows the homepage of Active Allowance. At the top, there's a black header bar with the site's name "Active Allowance" in white, followed by "... teaching kids dollars & sense". To the right are links for "About us", "Blog", and "Contact us". A yellow button labeled "FREE Trial" is visible. Below the header is a green navigation bar with four tabs: "Home", "How it Works", "FAQs", and "Register now!".

The main content area features a large heading "Teaching kids dollars and sense" in bold black text. Below it is a green text block: "Active Allowance is a simple web program that helps parents and carers teach children the benefits of helping with household chores". To the right of this text is a photo of two young children, a boy and a girl, smiling and sitting at a desk.

Further down, there's a section about earning cash credits for chores. It includes a bulleted list of benefits: "Help homes run smoothly" and "Give children valuable skills that will help them in later life".

There's also a section for children aged 6-15, a "Get started today" call-to-action, and information about the cost (\$50 per year).

On the right side, there's a graphic titled "Billie" showing a checklist for "Feed dog", "Homework", and "Don't fight", each with a green checkbox. Below this is a yellow testimonial box from "Jeremy Freedman" with the text: "We have now been an 'Active Allowance' family for five weeks and so far, the results have been amazing! [more testimonials...](#)".

At the bottom of the page is a footer bar with links: "Home", "About us", "Contact us", "Terms & conditions", and "Privacy policy".

Case study 19: Trace Tracker

Trace Tracker is a unique technology company based in Scandinavia who have developed a data system for capturing and tracking almost any product at every key point through its entire lifecycle. For example, Trace Tracker can trace fish from a particular farm right through processing, distribution, retail, and even to the individual consumer via credit card transactions.

There are too many ways this system can be helpful to describe here. It's not an easy thing to make instantly getable! The problem is that you can need a lot of information to explain a novel concept.

How much do you learn from the original home page?

Original

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Trace Tracker website. At the top, there is a banner with a blue gradient background featuring a compass rose logo on the left and the text "Consumer trust is the to be or not to be of the food industry" on the right. Below the banner is a navigation bar with links: Home, News, Products & Services, Customer cases, Partners, About us, Careers, and Investor Relations. There are also language selection buttons for German and English.

What We Do

When using our debit or credit cards, we leave electronic footprints. TraceTracker's business is taking care of vital electronic footprints left by all suppliers and manufacturers contributing to the production of a single product. The very same footprints that immediately can lead you to the exact products preventing devastating food scares and the subsequent loss of consumer confidence.

[Read more »»](#)

TraceTracker

News

GTNet and TraceCore XML

TraceTracker has been an active participant in the development of the newly published standard for the exchange of traceability information - TraceCore XML (TC).

[Read more »»](#)

Spreading the word - GTNet now on YouTube!

TraceTracker uses untraditional channels to spread information and knowledge on "traceability". Traceability Expert Øystein Gran Larsen in TraceTracker has just uploaded a video to YouTube explaining some traceability basics ..

[Read more »»](#)

IBM and TraceTracker combine HACCP and traceability

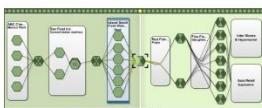
IBM has combined their leading risk management solution "IBM Food Safety Manager" with GTNet. This is a great example of how traceability can be used to strengthen a company's HACCP processes.

[Read more »»](#)

GTNet live demo

A live demo system of the Global Traceability Network (GTNet), is available at our [demosite](#). You need a username and password, which you can request by filling in our registration form. TraceTracker will then contact you in order to grant access to the live demo.

[Register here »»](#)



Events

2007-03-06 : Convenience Retailing Show, Birmingham, England

2007-03-09 : Healthy Ethnic Food, Anaheim USA, CA

2007-04-24 : European Seafood Biothon, Brussels, Belgium

Brochures

[Telop Trace](#)
[Barra Tracks and saves](#)
[TraceTracker Innovation ASA](#)
[GTNet Solution Brief \(Deutsch\)](#)
[GTNet Solution Brief](#)
[TraceTracker Fact Sheet - Expert Services](#)
[TraceTracker Global Traceability Network - Fact Sheet](#)
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What do you notice first?

Everything's boxed in, which translates to equivalent value in real estate, so there's not much help there. The layout feels like islands of content, and it's hard to know where to start.

My starting point is the two photographs over on the right hand side, but these don't have much content value. I'd probably then scan the other boxes on right and left, to see what could offer me quick meaning, then start down the centre column contents, which don't look like regular body content.

There is a diagram lower down on the page, but my instant reaction is that it looks really complicated, like an electrical system that I wouldn't understand if I looked at it.

The challenge here is clearly to take a system that **is** novel and complex and to make it **feel** accessible to a more general audience, so that people from business and government who arrive at this home page don't quickly decide that the product is over-complex, over-geeky, or unfinished. We want them to think, "Hey, I can understand this! I can see myself working with these guys. They talk my language."

The redesign focused on coming up with an accessible way to show how Trace Tracker's product works, while doing justice to the incredible scope and reach of the system.

The way I approached it was to create a custom graphic that **feels** simple, arranging simple, colourful icons on an appealing shiny base. The circular shape evokes flow, while the shiny plastic base represents the GTNet database.

I've pulled out just 3 key points at which the system can capture data (the massive unique selling point being the complete lifecycle coverage "from field to fork") . I hired an illustrator to design a set of stylised and generic icons that would encapsulate each step in the food value chain.

The logo is now larger and takes full ownership of the page, floating in more space. The navigation bar now has 7 bold and clear primary sections.

The site uses a businesslike blue and grey base colour scheme, with orange as the counterpoint. The minimal "box" design really lets the focus land on the content, which we've kept as brief as possible, in order to include as many visitors as we can, encouraging them to believe "I think this could be what I'm looking for" and to proceed further into the site.

Redesign

The screenshot shows a website redesign for TraceTracker. The header features a logo with a compass rose icon and the word "trace" in blue, followed by "tracker" in a smaller font. A navigation bar includes links for News, Products & Services (which is highlighted in orange), Case studies, Partners, About us, Careers, and Investor Relations. Below the navigation is a breadcrumb menu with Category, Second-level item, and Etc..

About TraceTracker

TraceTracker provide software solutions that enable organizations to use the GTNet: the Global Traceability Network.

GTNet is a unique system for tracing any item right through from source to consumption, which opens up new possibilities for business, government and consumers.

How GTNet works:

- How GTNet protects consumers from safety flaws, natural dangers and bioterrorism.
- Overview of Traceability Legislation & the requirements for global corporations.
- How GTNet works: Tracing the entire product cycle from producer to consumer.

Overview of GTNet

The diagram illustrates the GTNet traceability network across four stages: Production, Processing, Warehousing, and Consumer. Red dots on arrows indicate data entry points at each stage.

- Production:** Shows a wheat stalk icon. Text: Member suppliers and producers log details of products and raw materials and where they are sent.
- Processing:** Shows a factory icon. Text: Products and materials can be entered onto GTNet at every step of the lifecycle, building a complete picture.
- Warehousing:** Shows a warehouse icon.
- Retail:** Shows a shopping bag icon.
- Consumer:** Shows a credit card icon.

TraceTracker even tracks the crucial final link to consumers through credit and payment card transactions.

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Save the Pixel in a Nutshell

*"When I am working on a problem
I never think about beauty.
I only think about how to solve the problem.
But when I have finished,
if the solution is not beautiful,
I know it is wrong."*

R. Buckminster Fuller

Follow these 12 Steps to Web Design Enlightenment.

1. Get Your Design Head On

Say, “My goal is to create great communication, not something beautiful”.

Beauty doesn't always sell. You don't want your visitors to stand dumbstruck like lovesick schoolboys – you want them to take action.

Your only purpose is to create something that fulfils specific goals, which probably do not include making you look good to other web designers. Sorry.

2. The Site's Goals are

List the site's goals. Do not start until you can state concisely and confidently what this site is going to achieve.

Visualise how this site feels to use, what responses it will call forth in its visitors. It will start designing itself in your subconscious already. Your job is to let that process complete without getting in the way.

3. Target Visitors' Goals are

You need to know exactly who your visitors are going to be. Get in their heads. What really matters to them? What do they **want** this site to be, which proves they clicked the right link?

Talk through in your head what an actual visitor says to herself, from arriving on the site, getting what's on offer, knowing straightaway where she needs to head, finding interesting links and content, and finally being presented with a call to action she has no reason to decline.

“I will achieve the site's goal of ... by making it easy for my visitors to ...”

4. Steps to Winning

If you have seen the movie “E.T. - the Extra Terrestrial”, you'll remember a scene where Elliot manages to entice the alien out of the shed in his yard into the house, up the stairs, and into his room, using a trail of candy. This works because E.T. Is taking multiple small steps that require no commitment and earn him an instantly pleasurable reward. Consider your web site like an candy trail.

Break the big picture down into tangible steps. A 2-minute flow diagram on paper should be enough to get these real in your mind.

The steps should include:

- Affirmative “checkboxes” (a few key things your site/brand will affirm instantly)
- Information and messages you must communicate
- Information you want to collect from visitors
- Actions you need to facilitate
- Give & take
- Calls to action

5. Site Structure

Arrange your flow into sections and pages. (At Scratchmedia, we usually combine this step with planning a content & keyword strategy based on extensive keyword research.)

Wherever your visitor arrives on the site, the branding & navigation will:

- tell them they're in the right place
- let them instantly *get* what's on offer
- and provide obvious next steps to carry them forward.

6. Page Layout

Your pages will be immediately getable and readable, with everything in the right place.

Make a rough sketch on paper of what elements need to be where. Start conventionally, and only break away from conventions where there is no conventional solution that does the job.

Consider:

- Obvious areas of **Real Estate** (branding area, navigation area, main content area, other interesting stuff area...)
- **Ignorability.** Stuff that will exist on every page can be looked over, provided it is in the right position on the page. Don't put permanent features in prominent positions (e.g. in the content area).
- **Navigation.** Make sure it's where you'd expect to find it, and logically describes the scope of the site. Each link should be the appropriate size for its value and relevance.
- **Getability.** Are the right signals in the right place for every visitor to think "Oh right, I'm on this kind of a site. Looks like I'm in the right place!"?

7. Content

Design your content, not the box it comes in.

Pay most of your attention to designing the message and flow that real people will experience when they really use your site in real life. Ignore any other desires.

What combination of words and images will work best to convey the soft and hard information you want to communicate, and to keep your visitor moving along the M&M trail? What calls to action will you include? How noticeable should each one be?

8. Manage Attention

Choose where you want visitors to be looking on each page. Where are the next steps towards achieving the site's goal? Use the noticeability factors (Content, Size, Contrast, Boldness, Colour, Position, Space, 3D, and Movement) to draw attention to these key elements.

9. Symphony

All the features of your site and page design must work in harmony, creating a clear experience that will lead every visitor from instant identity through to achieving the site's goals, happily following the M&M trail at each point.

When you open your web page, where is your gaze drawn? Is that consistent with the goal you wish to achieve? What message is first apparent? Is that the right message?

After designing this site, you probably won't be able to see the wood for the trees, unfortunately, which is why there are 10 steps.

10. Test

You will learn a massive amount from even the simplest tests. Whatever design you create for your site will just be your best guess – one guess among an infinite range of possibilities.

The most important thing I've learned in design is, even following all the advice in this book, you cannot know whether the solution you've just sweated over will perform any better than any other solution.

The only way to find out is to put your design to the test.

You can do simple usability testing just by showing people a design and asking open-ended questions like "What do you see first?" or "Where would you go next?". These questions will help highlight weaknesses in your content and noticeability balance. (Do not ask, "Do you like this design?" as that has very little relation to success in the wild.)

I also thoroughly recommend implementing split testing using tools like Google Website Optimizer. These will help you test multiple options (guesses) in parallel, on real visitors, to find which content or design elements will convert more visitors to complete goals.

Do as many multiple short A/B or multivariate tests as you can, even devoting design budget to testing instead of graphic decoration. I can promise you it will pay incredible dividends – but that's the subject of another book.

About the Author

Ben Hunt, principal consultant with UK web agency Scratchmedia, is respected world-wide as a web designer and design teacher.

Since starting web design in 1994, Ben has developed hundreds of web sites for clients in every continent, from small businesses and charities to massive government agencies and online service providers.

Ben rode the bubble in the late 1990s as Head of Design for Freeserve, the first mass-market free ISP. He has been a director at brand consultancy Poulter Partners and at youth marketing specialists Dubit. As principal consultant at London web design consultancy Scratchmedia, Ben has helped corporations, government agencies, and NGOs all over the world achieve greater success through better design and usability.

Ben publishes free articles and tutorials on web design on his blog “Web Design from Scratch”, which has run since 2004 and attracts 100,000 visitors each month. It has established Ben as an authority on simple design, Web2.0, the design of web application user interfaces, usability, and now conversion rate optimisation.

This, his first book, “Save the Pixel – the Art of Simple Web Design”, has sold thousands of copies in ebook format, and the second edition now shortly to be published in print.

Ben's next book, to be published by Wiley & Sons in late 2010, addresses web site optimisation. The new book gives web site owners a radical, simple process for getting any web site found by more of the right people - and for compelling more of them to take action. The results may be surprising, and could change the way we look at web design.

About Scratchmedia

Ben Hunt's web agency, Scratchmedia, is known world-wide for creating web sites that work beautifully.

The agency specialises in crafting web sites that are visually appealing, easy to use, and compelling.

With practices based on Ben's 15 years' experience in design, marketing, and usability, Scratchmedia delivers marketing web sites, blogs, e-commerce stores, and innovative Web2.0 applications, all with the same dedication to the perfect user experience.

If you are inspired by what you have discovered in "Save the Pixel" and want the world's leading experts in simple web design to create your next amazing web site, please go along to <http://www.scratchmedia.co.uk/contact-us/> and tell us about your project.

Scratchmedia's small team of experts is always on the look out for opportunities to help transform great ideas and great businesses through innovative and powerful design. We are highly selective and only choose ethical causes that make the world a better place.

If you have a special project that needs fresh design expertise, we look forward to hearing from you.